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A FEW PRESS OPINIONS ON A YELLOW ASTER.

BY "IOTA."

ATHENÆUM.

"The warmest of welcomes is due from the reading public to any new author who conspicuously unites the qualities of intuition, candour, respect for the human and the divine, and such a natural straightforwardness as, taken together with the other three qualities, cannot fail to touch and move the heart. A welcome of this kind is unquestionably due to 'Iota.' Few who read these three volumes will deny to 'Iota' an ample, if need be a generous, recognition of the manner in which she has achieved her purpose. The characters are drawn with a notable combination of delicacy and downrightness, and with a pathos which is as effective as it is refined."

SPECTATOR.

"A remarkable performance, the author having singular command of striking phrases and a genius for suggesting rather than describing character."

SPEAKER.

"We do not pretend to be able to do justice to *A Yellow Aster* in the space at our command. It is no ordinary novel, either in conception or in treatment, and we feel no surprise at the gossip which has attributed it to at least one woman of well-recognised genius. Altogether a notable book."

DAILY TELEGRAPH.

"A Saul has arisen among the fictional prophets. *A Yellow Aster* is distinctly a work of genius remarkable for novelty of plot, force of diction, grace of literary style, and subtlety of psychical analysis. In short, *A Yellow Aster* is one of those rare novels of superb quality which compel the iciest criticism to thaw and resolve itself into warm admiration and unqualified praise."

WESTMINSTER GAZETTE.

"A first impression is that *A Yellow Aster* is one of the very best novels we have read for many months; a

PRESS OPINIONS (Continued).

second, that, in saying this, we do it rather less than justice. For it is a novel apart, with a strikingly original subject, which is worked out with a skill which is altogether unusual. This is a strong and excellent story, which, with all its pathos and tragedy, has the refreshment of a tonic."

DAILY CHRONICLE.

"The main idea is a fine one, and is finely treated; half a dozen chapters of real power follow one another with a noble swing and a sustained force that never degenerates into mere excitement. The book is a clever and interesting one; it is about something, and about something which is new, because people have only just begun to think and talk about it. It will not only be read, it will be useful as well as entertaining to those who read it."

THE WEEKLY SUN.

"Unmistakably the book of the hour. The dialogue is sparkling, and is irradiated ever and anon by bright flashes of humour; and it abounds in fine passages. *A Yellow Aster* must leap into wide and ever wider popularity."

LADY'S PICTORIAL.

"Every one has been discussing a new novel. *A Yellow Aster* has made a great and immediate success purely on its own merits."

QUEEN.

"'Iota' has achieved a brilliant success."

GLASGOW HERALD.

"The theme is an interesting one, and it is treated with remarkable ability by 'Iota,' whose touch is singularly firm, and whose portraiture is brilliant and telling. *A Yellow Aster* is quite distinctly above the ordinary run of novels, and we are glad to welcome so shrewd and clever a writer as 'Iota.'"

WESTERN MORNING NEWS.

"A book which is so powerful, that whether you like it or not, an obligation is upon you to return to it and look again."

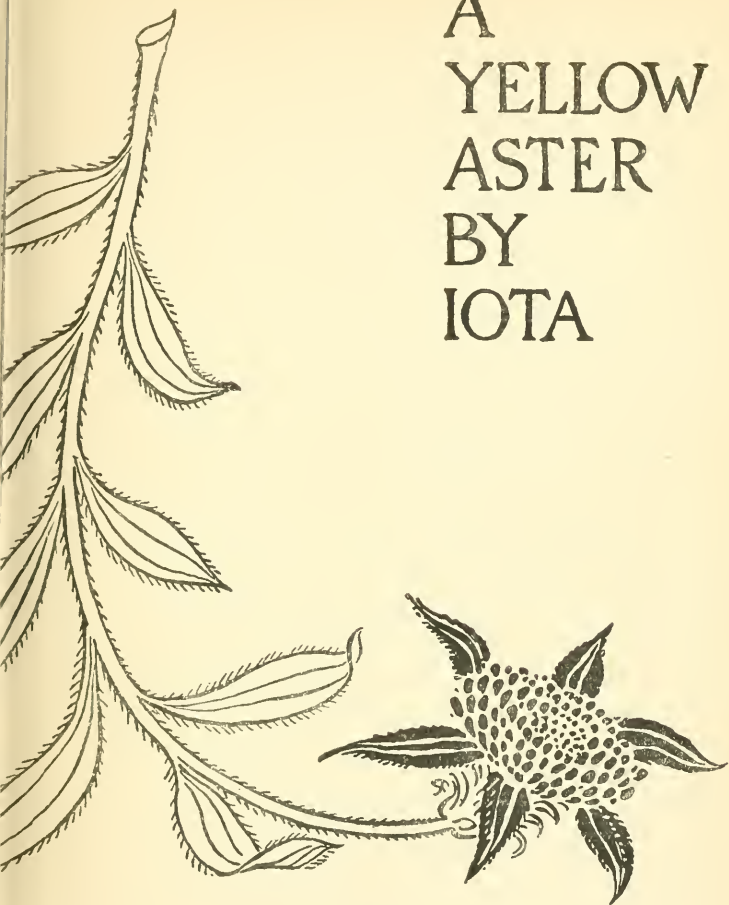
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A YELLOW ASTER

“And if this fought-for climax *is* ever reached, and science, creeping along the path of experiment, so invades the realm of Nature that a blue chrysanthemum or a yellow aster can be produced at will, the question still remains, has Nature been made more beautiful thereby?”

TWELFTH EDITION
COMPLETING FIF-
TEENTH THOUSAND

A
YELLOW
ASTER
BY
IOTA



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A YELLOW ASTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE stable-yard of Waring Park seemed to be slightly off its head on a certain fine afternoon in June. Such an afternoon as it was, so sweet and so soft, so full of fragrant, sleepy haze, that any sound louder than the sing-song of a cricket must have distracted any ordinary nerve-possessing mortal.

On this particular afternoon, however, the sole occupants of the yard were the stable-boys, the groom's urchin, and the under-gardener's lad. And as none of these had yet reached the level of nerves, whilst the blood of all of them throbbed with the greed for illegal sport in every shape, their state of lazy content was in no way upset by a medley of blood-curdling shrieks, squeals, and gobbles that issued from the throats of a little boy and a big turkey, which the boy was swinging round and round by the tail, from the vantage-ground of a large, smooth, round stone. And this he accomplished with an amount of strength that was preternatural, if one had judged by the mere length of him,

and had not taken into consideration the enormous development of the imp's legs and arms.

The stable-boys grinned, and smoked like furnaces as the show proceeded, and the other two cheered like Trojans, in the cruelty of the natural boy; and it might have gone badly for the turkey if there had not swooped down upon him and his tormentor, just in the nick of time, a little, lean, wiry woman, armed with an authority which even the imp, after one spasmodic struggle, saw best not to gainsay.

"Master Dacre, whatever do you do it for? Do you think the bird has no feelings? There is no sense in such goings-on."

"There is sense," spluttered the boy at full speed "I like bein' swung, and I like swingin' the turkey, and I'll learn him to like it too; and if he don't learn that, anyway, he'll learn something else, which is life's discipline, which father says I'm learnin' when you whip me. If I want it, so does the turkey, and wuss. I b'longs to higher orders nor beasts and birds."

Here the grins of the stable-boys broke into hoarse guffaws, and Mary's ire culminated in a sharp rebuke all round.

"Go to your work, you idle fellows! I told your father long ago, Jim, what 'ud be the latter end of you. As for you, Robert, I could cry when I think of your blessed mother! And what business have you in the yard?" she cried, turning on the two younger sinners. "Be off with you this instant! 'Tis easy to see none of the men are about. You two, Jim and Robert, you'd be surprised yourselves if you could see what soft idiots you look. with them stumps of pipes between your jaws. Look, Master Dacre, look at the

bird's tail! Haven't you any heart at all? The creature might have been through the furze covert."

"There's not a feather broke," said the boy, after a critical survey—"not one. I believe that tail were made for swingin' as much as my arms was."

For an instant words failed Mary, and she employed herself hushing the bird into his pen. When she came back, Dacre had disappeared, and the yard seemed to be quite clear of human life, not to be traced even by the smell of shag tobacco.

Pursuit was useless, as Mary very well knew, so she returned to her nursery a good deal down at heart, muttering and murmuring as she went,—

"Oh Lord! whatever is to be the end of it all? Learning is the ruin of the whole place; and yet them children is as ignorant as bears, excepting for their queer words and ways. Set them to read a Royal Reader, or to tot up a sum, bless you, they couldn't for the life of them. And the tempers of the two," she went on, putting the cross stitches on a darn, "their parents had no hand in them, anyway. Where they got 'em from the Lord only knows. Tempers, indeed! And from them two blessed babies as bore 'em!" She lifted her head and glanced out of the window.

"Look at 'em," she whispered, "hand in hand up and down the drive, talking mathymatics, I'll be bound;" and Mary's eyes returned to her basket a trifle moist. She had nursed Mrs. Waring and Mrs. Waring's children, and she was a good soul, with a deal of sentiment about her.

As it happened, Mr. and Mrs. Waring were not discussing mathematics. They were just then deeply and solemnly exercised in their minds as to the exact

date of a skeleton recently unearthed from some red sandstone in the neighbourhood. They had dismissed the carriage at the hall gates, and were now hot in argument concerning the bones, each holding diametrically opposed views on the subject, and each struggling hard to prove his or her side.

Now and again the husband's voice rose to a pretty high pitch, and his fine mouth was touched with a sneer, and the wife's eyes flashed and flamed and shot out indignant wrath. Her hat had fallen off far down the drive, and her rings of yellow fluffy hair fell wildly over her forehead; one small hand was clenched in eager protest, but the other was clasped tight in her husband's.

They always went like this, these two; they had got into the foolish way very early in their acquaintance, and had never been able to get out of it.

Suddenly some common hypothesis struck them both at once, and Mrs. Waring cried out with a gasp,—

"If we can prove it, I am right!"

"Yes, if you can prove it, darling, that's the point, and I hope that you never may. Have you any idea, dear love, what the proving of this will undo, what it must upset?"

"I think I have," she said slowly, her blue eyes gleaming eagerly; "but it seems to me whenever a great hubbub is made about the upsetting of some theory, that it generally ends in being much ado about nothing, and that the new thing that springs from the ashes of the old dead is infinitely more beautiful than ever its predecessor was, for it is one step nearer the truth."

"Dearest, we must end our talk," groaned Mr.

Waring, peering with terrified looks through his eyeglasses. "Here is Gwen, most slightly clad, and of a bright blue tint, pursued by Mary. I fear very much that story of Boadicea you told her has instigated her to this action. I think, dearest, that if you will excuse me, I will go to the study and work out this question of date."

Mr. Waring turned nervously, and made a gentle effort to disengage his hand from his wife's, but she clutched him firmly. "Henry!" she cried, "you would not desert me?"

"Oh, my dear," he gasped, "what can I do? The child must be cleansed and, I presume, punished. I can be of no use," and he still showed signs of flight; but the horror-stricken eyes of his wife, fixed pleadingly on him, made him waver and wait.

By a superhuman effort Mary got up first.

"Oh, ma'am," she shrieked, in tones that went through Mrs. Waring's head, "Oh, ma'am, look at her! I found her with nothing on but this rag and some leaves, painted blue, and varnished—varnished, sir, eating acorns outside of the orchard fence. It's common indecency, ma'am, and if it's to continue I can't——"

By this time Gwen had arrived, desperately blown, but overflowing with words. Rather an advantage under the circumstances, for her parents had not one between them.

"Mother, I were a woaded Briton, and blue all over. Mag Dow did me behind and I done the front, and it aren't common naked if queens done it like you said. She did, Mary, say it Thursday, when she begun the history course. Dacre was to be a woaded king too,

but he were a beast, and wouldn't do nothing but swing turkeys for discipline."

"Mary, I think perhaps you should give Miss Gwen a bath, and then we will consider what further course to pursue."

Mrs. Waring caught her skirts nervously and drew a step nearer to her husband.

"A bath, ma'am ! Don't you see she's painted and varnished ?—no water'll touch that, ma'am ; turpentine must be, and cart grease, not to say paraffin,—and, ma'am, the indecency !"

"Please, Mary," implored the tortured woman, "oh, please take her away and put the cart grease on—and—the other things, and we can then talk over the rest."

Here the light of a sudden inspiration leapt into her face, and she turned to her husband. "Henry," she said solemnly, "do you not think that Gwen should go to bed ? She seems to me," she continued, taking a critical survey of the blue-daubed figure, "she seems to me a little old for such very peculiar adaptations of history."

"To bed," remarked the husband, infinitely relieved. It seemed quite a happy solution to the whole question, and must fulfil every purpose,—be Gwen's Nemesis, a salve to Mary's hurt morality, and a merciful deliverance to all others concerned. "Yes, a very sensible suggestion of yours, dearest. I consider that it would be a most salutary measure to send Gwen to bed."

"Indeed, sir," remarked Mary, without a particle of the satisfaction that might have been expected from her, "Miss Gwen will be fit for no other place by the time I've done with her, what with the paraffin, and

the scrubbing, and her skin that tender. Oh come, Miss, come away," she cried grimly, laying hold of Gwen.

"Grace, my darling," said Mr. Waring, passing his free hand wearily over his brow, "such scenes as these are indeed upsetting. I am quite unable to take up the thread of our discourse."

"I feel as you do, Henry," said his wife sadly; "we seem to have so very little time to ourselves."

"Do you think, Grace, we should procure a tutor for those children? Let me see, how old are they?"

"I have their ages down somewhere on my tablets," said Mrs. Waring, rummaging in her pocket, and producing a little book of ivory tablets. She consulted it anxiously.

"Just fancy!" she exclaimed, with astonished eyes, "Dacre will be seven in April—I had no idea he was so old—and I see Gwen is just twelve months younger."

"I think their physical powers are now fairly developed—indeed, I am of opinion that the boy's development will continue to be mainly physical; he will, I fear, run much to cricket and other brutal sports. But no doubt he has some small amount of brain power; that should be made the most of. We must now get some one who will undertake this business for us, dear love."

"Ah," said his wife plaintively, "the feeding and physical care of children seem terrible responsibilities; they weigh upon my life. But the development of their intellectual powers!—I wish the time for it had kept off just a little longer, until we were farther on in our last, our best work. And if," she said wearily,

"you think the brain power of Dacre, at least, so insignificant, the task becomes Herculean."

"We must consult the Rector, dear."

"I feel," said Mrs. Waring, "that in some way we must have failed in our duty. The grammar that child spoke was appalling, as was also the intonation of her words. I wonder how this has come to pass? I should have thought her mere heredity would have saved us this."

Mrs. Waring sighed heavily; fate seemed against her; even heredity was playing her false.

"It is shocking, dear, but accountable," said her husband soothingly; "you are disturbed, and forget how widely modified heredity becomes by conditions. If I recollect aright, Gwen mentioned one—Mag—h'm, Dow. Children are imitative creatures. And now, with regard to another matter. I think, dear love, it were wiser if you discontinued that proposed course of history. The imagination of our daughter Gwen must not be fostered until it has a sounder intellectual basis to work up from."

"Very well, dear;" and Mrs. Waring sighed a sigh of relief. No one but herself knew the horrible embarrassment of having those two children sitting opposite to her, and glaring all over her, while she discoursed to them on the customs of the early Britons, and it was only a consuming sense of duty that had seized on her, and forced her to the task.

CHAPTER II.

Not only the entire county of ——shire, but even the whole University of Cambridge, had been thrown into quite a whirl of emotion by the marriage of Henry Waring and Grace Selwyn, the most unexpected ever concocted in heaven or on earth.

A Senior Wrangler and a Fellow of his college, who, at twenty-six, eats, drinks, and sleeps mathematics, besides being possessed of other devouring passions for certain of the minor sciences, does not seem a very fit subject for matrimony, with its petty follies and cares.

If a man is, besides, the son of a cynic and a book-worm, who loathed and eschewed the sex with bitter reason, and if his own practical knowledge had been gained chiefly through the classics and the bedmakers,—the one of which appeals as little to one's sense of propriety as the other to one's fleshly sense—to him must the prospect of a domestic and patriarchal career seem as remote as it is undesirable.

And yet Henry Waring found himself, to his constant and increasing bewilderment, embarked on one almost before he altogether knew where he was.

The year previous to his marriage he had suffered a good deal from *ennui*. A favourite theory in geology,

over which he had peered himself half blind, was suddenly exploded without hope of reconstruction. He felt rather lost and *distrain*, and cast about for some tangible solid brainwork.

But to pass the time until the fresh inspiration came on, he took to propounding stray problems, and—through the press—launching them broadcast over the land. Strange to say, he got answers, and by the score. A good many more “mute inglorious Solons” infest our villages than we have any notion of.

Mr. Waring groaned in spirit and mourned over the depravity of the race as he read their epistles, and drew farther back than ever into his shell. If the average man and woman without the academical walls resembled these productions, the less one had to do with them the better, he very reasonably reflected.

After this had been going on for the space of three months, he came, one morning, down to breakfast. He felt very sick at heart; his pupils seemed so amazingly full of enthusiasm for minor concerns, and so absolutely lacking in it for the one thing needful, that he was cut to the quick and moved to much gentle wrath. And then these letters! They were fast becoming his Nemesis.

He ate his breakfast, and watched with unwonted pleasure some dust motes dancing in a sunbeam; and raising his eyes to follow them, they unconsciously strayed farther out into the college quad, where the dew was still sparkling on every grass blade, and shimmering on every flower.

Mr. Waring felt quite cheerful and revived as he pushed away his plate and cup and began to open his letters. Letter after letter was laid down, a spasm of

pain passing each time across his face, and more than once an audible groan escaped him.

At last he picked up a letter gingerly, as he handled all this variety of correspondence—the village mathematician being an unclean beast—but this letter seemed somehow different; he turned it over with growing interest, and even took the pains to examine the postmark; then he opened it, and found a quite different production from any he had yet received.

First, on opening it, a curious indefinite scent struck on his nostrils. He sniffed it up perplexedly; some queer old memories began to stir in him, and he paused a moment to try and classify them, but he could not, so he set himself to examine the contents of the missive.

The answer given to his problem was accurate, and the accompanying remarks clear, strong, and to the point, written in a woman's hand, and signed with a woman's name, "Grace Selwyn."

That letter was answered before the breakfast things were cleared away, and certain fresh problems enclosed which were not sent in any other direction.

Many letters went and came after that, containing problems and their answers, the answers always full of that strange, vague, delicious scent, which seemed to waft itself through the study and to remain there, caught with the dust motes in the sunbeam.

A longing and a yearning for those little notes began to take possession of Henry Waring, and to disturb his mind. Old memories of the time when he wore frocks, and toddled, began to haunt him, and his work was no longer done by reflex action.

He consulted a doctor, but as he only confided half

his symptoms to that scientific person, quite suppressing the letters, the doctor felt rather out of it, and prescribed quinine, which had no effect whatsoever.

One morning the yearning for a letter grew suddenly quite overmastering; and none came. This was the climax. By a sudden impulse, which he never succeeded in explaining to himself on any satisfactory grounds, Mr. Waring went to his bedroom, knelt down by his big chest of drawers, and proceeded to pack a little valise with every article he did not want, leaving out all those he did. Then he stepped into a cab and made for the station.

Towards the close of the day he presented himself at the door of a queer old red-brick manor house in Kent, owned by a Colonel Selwyn and his wife, and asked simply for "Miss Grace Selwyn."

In three months from that day the two came down the path hand in hand, and stepped out together on life's journey; and six months later, through the death of a cousin, Waring Park fell to them and made up for the loss of the Fellowship.

CHAPTER III.

THE very day after Gwen's flight into history, Mr. and Mrs. Waring walked up to the Rectory, and got through their talk with the master of it.

They might not have been altogether so prompt, being still absorbed body and soul in the skeleton, had not Gwen been suffering tortures from the state of her skin, through the combined action of paint, paraffin, and other unguents, and from a bad and quite abnormally noisy cold, which kept her presence *en evidence* whenever she, by fits and starts, broke loose from the nursery, and which was a weapon judiciously wielded by Mary to keep her parents well up to the mark.

They had delivered themselves to Mr. Fellowes, and were now walking down the Rectory drive, both looking a little pained. Mr. Waring's disengaged hand was pressed to his forehead and his brows were knit, and Mrs. Waring looked as if she were engaged in a silent struggle against disturbing thoughts.

The air was still and soft, and some stray stars had already taken possession of the evening sky, where the little streaks of rose, left by the sun, looked quite out of place,—and felt it too, seemingly, for they were creeping behind the hills with a soft little shiver of

dismay, like a timid guest who suddenly discovers that every soul but himself has left.

The silence and the calm helped Mr. and Mrs. Waring, who were both trying to throw off the consideration of minor matters and to return to that of vital affairs. Generally so easy, like the slipping back of a pair of seals into the water after a rugged land journey, to-night this seemed a strangely hard task to tackle.

They often seemed to receive the same impression at the same moment, and something or other in the bright glow of the Rectory study, and in the perfectly at-home and at-ease air of a pair of twins of whom the Rector's wife had temporary charge, and had brought in to say good-night, had given them a little jar which would keep quivering.

These were not sufficiently tangible sensations for discussion ; there seemed nothing in them that these two persons could seize upon and argue from to any definite purpose, so they were struggling to put them behind them. Mr. Waring succeeded, his wife was not so fortunate.

The vague feeling was quite like a Jack-in-the-box for sudden appearances during the next few days, and whenever it sprang up, a little ache followed hot on the heels of it.

At last she made a supreme effort to regain her reason, and remarked, with rather deceptive cheerfulness,—

“I think, dearest, we may now dismiss this matter from our minds. I am quite willing to trust it in Mr. Fellowes' hands, as I presume you are. You do feel perfect confidence in him ?” she questioned a little

anxiously, as Mr. Waring did not speak for a moment.

"Darling, yes!" he said with a start, "in this matter certainly—yes,—this is quite within his *rôle*; I do not think we could find a wiser helper or counsellor. And he is so thoroughly a gentleman; he so kindly waived his theological objections when he found that on this part of the question we had both arrived at a fixed conclusion. Yes, in the choice of a tutor we could desire no better adviser. At the moment you spoke I was speculating upon Fellowes from another point of view; I am really quite astonished that a man so advanced in some phases of thought should be so limited, so—almost retrograde in others, and, above all, so strangely content with his life, with hardly a moment in it for undisturbed reflection, and no moment at all for any attempt at valuable work. I cannot imagine either where he finds companionship."

He paused to sigh. "We have so little time, love, to give to him, time is so very much to us. Our other neighbours seem to hunt when they do not fish, and fish when they do not hunt; they can have neither time nor strength left for intellectual culture. Then they have, I believe, duties; they sit on Boards and Councils, and no doubt follow other pursuits of like order; but as companions, naturally, they must be impossible. Then as to his wife, she is a comely person—she is, is she not, dearest? I am so very poor a judge—but I do not perceive any glimmerings of thought in her. You can better judge of her, dear; have you ever discovered any?"

Mrs. Waring considered for a moment, then she shook her head.

"I do not think I have expected any," she said, "so indeed I have hardly looked. I have only thought of her kindness, and of her knowledge of children and their feeding. I am very fond of her—and so very grateful—but I have never once really talked to her."

"I thought so ; it is strange—*very* strange. However, I am most thankful this business is concluded, we may now be able to begin those papers to-night—I look forward with much pleasure to them. Curious what very opposed views we take on this subject—h'm, I fancy I am right, dear."

Mrs. Waring thought not, and signified the fact by a very decided shake of her sweet golden locks, which looked more like spun silver in the moon's rays.

They had now reached the great flight of steps that flanked either side of the entrance door.

When they got to the top, by one accord they paused, and leaned over the castellated ivy-clad wall that protected the platform of granite slabs connecting the two flights of steps, and gazed out into the evening ; but a sudden horrible sound made Mrs. Waring jump nervously, then quiver from head to foot, and caused her husband's brows to contract as sharply as if there had been a spring in them.

It turned out to be Gwen scraping an old violin, and coughing frightfully all down the corridor.

"Dearest, do you think we should summon Dr. Guy?" said Mr. Waring, when they had somewhat recovered.

"Oh no, love ; Mary assures me that there is no danger whatever ; she calls this dreadful noise 'a simple stomach cough.'"

"In that case we must request Mary to keep her in

the nursery, such noises are most upsetting. Pray be as quick as you can, my darling, we might get to work at once. But surely it is not the gong I hear?"

"Love, I fear it is only too true," cried Mrs. Waring in trembling distress. "I had no idea of the lateness of the hour; and oh, Henry, we were also late yesterday, and the servants were quite upset. Oh, you will be quick with your dressing, will you not?"

Then with one last little hand-squeeze she fled to her room, with a terrified glance into the solemn face of a hurt-looking footman.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN he had bidden farewell to the Warings in his porch, and watched them curiously till a clump of firs hid them from him, Mr. Fellowes went back to his study, with a very curious assortment of expressions on his face ; there was a good deal of amusement there, a decided touch of sadness, much doubt, and some dismay.

He had, however, little time to reduce this confusion to order ; an impatient tap at the door was followed by the entrance of a bright, eager little woman, in a long, trailing garment of a curious combination of heliotrope and pale yellow.

"John, are you ready for me? May I hear all of it?" she demanded, putting her little hand on his big one.

"I feel in rather a yeasty condition at this minute, but I'll subside shortly, no doubt. Will you be able to hold out a little longer?"

"Haven't I borne it for two mortal hours and twenty minutes? Were they talking all the time? I was in an awful fright it was something I mustn't hear. Two scientists in trouble about their souls, perhaps?"

"Fortunately I can divulge all I know, but you needn't be flippant. It's all very funny, but it's just as woefully sad. What on earth are you at?"

"Pinning up my skirts; the fire would ruin this colour in a night. Do you like my gown?"

"I do, but whether the parish will is another question."

"Oh, never mind the parish, I'll teach it; you have no idea how easy it is to get round people if you know the track. Is that yeast risen high enough, or has it gone sad? Remember, I have held out a frightful time."

"Hold out another five minutes while I write a note. I must catch this post."

When Mr. Fellowes brought his little seventeen-year-old wife home to the respectable parish of Waring, just four years before this time, it was the generally expressed opinion of most competent judges that he had a good deal to answer for.

To begin with, she was an American—that fact in itself was quite without precedent. The entire clerical annals of the diocese did not furnish a like example. This, to any right-minded judgment, was as much as an insult to the parishioners, who were in consequence put to much trouble and inconvenience in rubbing up their imaginations to tackle the case, having no previous experience to go upon.

A deceased colonel, of whom they knew a great deal too much, and a living peer, of whom, on the contrary, they knew a great deal too little, both inhabitants of the county, had indeed married Americans, the results in the one case being disastrous; of the other they possessed no proven data, but they were at least at liberty to draw their own conclusions.

But for a parson to do this thing! It was unheard of, and partook of the nature of a scandal.

Then Mrs. Fellowes was pretty, and gay, and, it must be confessed, *chic*.

They could have put up with the prettiness, and even the brightness,—they were used to certain varieties of both these things in their own girls,—but the *chicness*!—that was the quality their souls struck against; it seemed expressly to have been sent by Satan himself “to buffet them withal.” And the girl’s dress for a clergyman’s wife was simply audacious! And yet when a large and representative female conclave had met and dissected her “things” over half a dozen teas, they were forced to the conclusion that she had not a complex or expensive article in her whole wardrobe.

“So much the worse,” Lady Mary, the leader of the parish *ton*, remarked, and with some reason too; “it shows that it is not the clothes that stamp the girl, it is the girl who stamps the clothes. There is something fundamentally wrong there.”

This, being put in the form of an axiom, spread widely, and carried much weight.

This was four years ago, however, and things had changed a good deal. Mrs. Fellowes’ husband was no fool; he knew what he was about when he brought home, as the finish to the one long holiday of his life, the little New England girl to be his helpmeet.

CHAPTER V.

"Now, Ruth," said Mr. Fellowes when he had finished and despatched his note, and, lighting a cigarette, had settled himself in his armchair opposite to her, "I'll yield you up all I know. It was the queerest interview I ever had with that queer pair.—You needn't wriggle with anticipation, my dear, no human creature could reproduce the scene with any justice to himself or to his subject.—Waring had most palpably put on for the occasion a brisk man-of-the-world air that was superb, but his wife seemed dreamier than ever, and limper, and her hat looked rather askew."

"It always does, but do go on."

"Directly you give me a chance, dear. Waring opened the campaign with a little small talk as he always does, but it was quite off-hand and reckless to-day. He had hardly set his gentle tap fairly flowing, however, when his wife suddenly woke up, and chipped in with quite phenomenal clearness and precision.

"‘Dear Henry,’ she said, with mild authority, ‘suppose we state the object of our call, we can converse afterwards.’"

"Then it all came out. First one stated a fact or a theory, then the other had his innings. It was hard enough to follow the two, and to watch them at the

same time ; one never likes to miss the moment when they clasp hands again, and the little looks they cast on each other in the process. It appears the pair meditate a definite experiment on those wretched children, and want my help in securing a bear-leader for the task."

"Good gracious!" gasped Mrs. Fellowes. "Go on," she commanded grimly, "what is it?"

"On no account whatever is either to be sent to school or allowed to hold intercourse with other children; no woman is to have any hand in their tuition; naturally, cricket, football, and every other boyish sport is to be carefully excluded from the curriculum, and all Christian teaching is to be utterly tabooed."

"Mercy on us!"

"The facts of the Old Testament are to be imparted to them with other ancient history, and they are to be well instructed in the natural sciences. By these means they will learn to know God in His Works—with a capital 'W'—Mrs. Waring observed this solemnly to her husband for my benefit. 'Exactly, my darling,' he replied, with a most surprising alacrity—they had rehearsed this point, those two babies!

"When the children are launched into their teens, and have presumably arrived at an age of more or less discretion, the Bible and any other existing evidences of Christianity obtainable are to be formally presented to them. The imps may then receive these or reject them, according to their particular turn of mind, but in no case are they to be biassed.

"The parents have seemingly occupied themselves a good deal with this part of the experiment, and

regard this presentation of a choice of beliefs as a sort of function on which they mean to take exhaustive observation."

The Rector paused to roll another cigarette. When he had finished and lighted it, he went on,—

"Ruth, you are an intelligent woman, and won't misjudge me when I say that this experiment in itself seems to be a reasonable one.

"This Bible-reading question is an awful one," he went on, musing aloud. "We all have had—every decent English man, woman, and child of us—the Bible religiously drilled into us from the time of consciousness till whatever time we can manage to read it for ourselves; then we are exhorted to carry on the exercise independently. And a good percentage of people do. You'd be astonished at the number of people who never miss reading their Bible every day of their lives, and perhaps more astonished still if you were to know the amazingly small effect it has on the lives of these people. Even from an intellectual point of view, it is incredible to me how little the average human being has grasped the heritage he possesses in this book.

"I was speaking to a girl the other day—by far the most intelligent one I know in these regions; she was talking to me with perfect unrestraint and frankness about all sorts of things. She told me she could see no beauty whatsoever in the Bible, and that she had never been able to derive an atom of encouragement or assurance from anything in it. If it did not bore, it upset her, and made belief harder. It had become a mere patter to her by vile reading and intonation, and the remarkable turns of thought given to it by many minds insulted her reason. Even the poetry of the

diction had been spoilt for her, and seemed, she said, to reek of half-fledged curates. Under some conditions this experiment of the Warings might prove a success."

"Oh, but with that mother!"

"Ah, yes, that alters the whole aspect of affairs! If you could only have heard the passionless, analytical style in which Waring and his wife discussed the matter, and speculated on the issue, which they think will be more typical in Gwen than in Dacre, his brute strength being, in their opinion, his strong point, and his theological side hardly worth considering. They throw it in, however, 'careless like,' as, if the experiment is to be tried, it is just as easy to try it on two as on one."

"Mercy on us!" again said Mrs. Fellowes, clattering the fireirons viciously.

"By the way, Waring amused me intensely by one revelation he made; he could hardly get it out, and I saw him fling a pathetically-deprecating glance at his wife, and give her hand a squeeze before he began. He felt he had to account for the luckless Dacre's strength of legs, of which he seems to have as poor an opinion as the Psalmist; he feared I might fall into the error of casting the blame on him or his wife, so he determined I should know the real cause. 'You will hardly believe me,' he observed, 'when I tell you that my wife, with her refined intellectuality, is the outcome of long generations of soldiers and of—ahem—famous duellists, and I fear our son, Dacre, is a very clearly-defined specimen of throwing-back.' Poor Mrs. Waring! she felt her ancestry keenly, and got as red as a rose during the confession."

"Goodness gracious me! What a woman! what

a pair ! What in the name of goodness brought the two together, and made them marry each other, and produce children ? If I were Providence and had that on my mind, I'd never look up again."

"My dear child !"

"John, in the present state of my feelings—brought on by you yourself, recollect—you must forget your sacerdotal character, and only remember my state of original sin. Why should two beautiful children's lives be spoilt for the vagaries of a pair who never had any right to bear children ? Think of Gwen's sad old face, full of the trouble of all ages ; think of her naughtiness, with that horrible unique sort of infernal touch about it : that painting herself blue is the most childish escapade I remember.

"I was at Mrs. Doyle's yesterday, and she was telling me a lot about Mrs. Waring before we came. After Dacre's birth, she said, it was absolutely ghastly to see her with the child ; she was terrified to hold it, and trembled like a leaf whenever she absolutely had to. Poor Mrs. Doyle, she got quite irritated and excited about one thing. It seems she could not nurse her own children at all, and that Mrs. Waring was a capital mother from that point of view, and Mrs. Doyle seemingly could not see at all why an unnatural little bundle of scientific data should score off her, a good wholesome creature made for a mother, in this manner."

"It was certainly too bad, and one would never have expected it of Mrs. Waring," said the Rector, laughing.

"Oh, and whenever Mary brought either of the babies to her, or that she met them in the corridors or about the grounds, Mrs. Doyle says her one request was that Mary should take the creature away and give

it food, it looked faint ! They were both huge, flourishing, healthy babies, I hear."

"Ruth," said Mr. Fellowes suddenly, "I wish those people would keep away from church."

"You are shedding your sacerdotal character with a vengeance ! What do you mean ?"

"You have no idea how they distract me, sitting there together with their eyes far away, and their ears sealed, except at the odd times they give those spasmodic simultaneous starts, and twist their thoughts back for the minute to what's going on."

"But, John, for the sake of the parish——"

"If the parish can't keep up to its ordinary pretty low water-mark without this prick to its piety, it must be in a poor state, and even more of a discredit to me than I imagined. They are far too good to be asked to play this weekly farce for the parish's sake. It was Hopkins, not I, who insisted upon this church-going, and of course they gave in in their gracious, simple way ; and now, not even a water spout would stop them from coming, they are so concerned for my feelings. What a pair of unconscious Christians they are to be sure ! One sees it cropping up in all directions."

"I wish it would appear anyway in the management of their children ; I don't see many traces of it there. When is this wretched experiment to be set going ?" asked Mrs. Fellowes.

"As soon as I can procure a suitable person to conduct it. I think I know a fellow who might do."

"What business have they with children, those two ?" cried Mrs. Fellowes, with a little spasm of pain twisting about her mouth. "I don't believe those children ever got properly hugged in all their lives by

that inhuman little mother of theirs. And oh, Gwen's dress ! That is awful ! ”

“ Ah, yes, that makes the whole affair very much sadder ! Don't you think dinner is ready ? Yes, those children have a great deal to fight against ; it isn't their ancestors alone who will handicap them, poor little beggars.”

“ Cartloads of saints for ancestors wouldn't be worth a rap to them with an eerie little creature like that for a mother,” said Mrs. Fellowes hotly, in the pretty, lazy drawl into which her touch of twang had developed itself. “ I pity that wretched coming tutor.”

She let her skirts drop, and gave them a dexterous kick as she went out, to give them the correct “ hang.”

CHAPTER VI.

THERE was no time lost in setting the experiment going, and it was soon in full swing. Its birth pangs were awful, and embraced in their throes a great number of persons. The parents' sufferings were so complex and so quite peculiar to themselves that it is impossible to expound them to an unsympathising public.

The tortures that couple endured during the first few months after the initial stage of intellectual development had been instituted, and was being dealt with, were severe ; but they were in no wise connected with their children's anguish at the sudden and unexpected onslaught on their higher parts.

Their misery arose chiefly from the jarring and inconveniently close contact with tutors, whom, in their unconscious Christian way, they found it their duty to admit for some part of every day into the edge of their lives. This was a terrible discipline, more especially as during these times the unhappy instructors also thought it their duty to ease off their slough of learning and to expand their social parts, and thus the manufacture of small talk became a daily necessity in the lives of the distracted pair.

They had both taken infinite pains to provide silent entertainment for their guests,—or rather succession of guests,—in the tutoring line. The standard scientists

were first tried, and these seeming to have but little effect, a whole cartload of mixed literature, including all the rag-tag and bobtail of fiction the bookseller wanted to get off his hands, was imported, and spread about enticingly. Theology and ethics were also given a show ; till at last all the tables at one side of the room were spotted with slate, yellow, and dull blues and browns, and every form of journal from the *Times* to the *Police News* was scattered broadcast over the place, and all with a view to lay hold on the tutorial mind, and keep it independent of its entertainers.

Directly the tutor—for the time being—entered at his appointed hour, they rose simultaneously from their work, as if the same spring moved them. They hurried towards him with outstretched hands, sat down side by side facing him, and broke into conversation, which, if gaspy, and at times inconsequent, from the sudden upheaval of waves of thought in one or the other of them, was kept up with gallant relentlessness till the period of detention was at an end.

As soon as the clock announced this event, they broke off suddenly with a click, and the tutor was, so to speak, shot out,—and the rent he had made in the lives of his entertainers was patched up as well as might be for that day.

But during the entire first course of those tutors, Mr. and Mrs. Waring felt always as if they were suffering from ragged edges.

As for Gwen and Dacre, their first taste of reclamation from the savage state was bitter, sudden, and condign. Civilisation seems the last thing in the world capable of soothing the savage breast, especially if the savage who owns it is young, and in rude health.

Then Mary suffered. It was a hard blow to find her fledgelings torn from her in one fell stroke, and only allowed to return at odd moments for repairs to skin and clothes.

Poor Mrs. Fellowes fretted herself into a regular feverish attack.

As for the tutors themselves, the less said of their sufferings the better. Three succumbed to them in four months.

The one that followed, a most excellent person, and cut out for a family man, broke off his engagement for fear of consequences ; his slight substratum of scientific knowledge having got so much stirred up while at Waring Park that he grew bewildered.

If such results as he had to deal with, he reflected, were to be seen in the green tree, what might not come to pass in the dry ? And he was well aware of the cloudy ancestry of his lady-love, and on his own side had not very much to boast of. It was unfortunate ; but it certainly did seem sacrilegious impertinence in him to attempt what his betters had so egregiously failed in.

CHAPTER VII.

MANY tutors had come and gone, and much had been endured both from the children's point of view and from that of the instructors.

But time went on unheeding, and Gwen and Dacre were lying under an old cherry-tree in the orchard one day late in August.

The sun shone aslant through the crimson-tinted leaves above them, and threw flickering rosy shadows across the faces of the two as they lay there in the cool grass, with wisps of fern under their heads for pillows.

Dacre, however, seemed to benefit but little from this arrangement; his head was oftener off its support than on; he twisted and turned, and wriggled and plunged; even his toes moved visibly through his thick boots.

He was supposed to be reading, and kept up the pretence from time to time; but the words conveyed no sense to his restless eyes, which moved as if they were on wires. Now and again he got irritated, and threw the book down with a snort.

The sister and brother spent much of their time together nowadays. Fate had perhaps quite as much

to do with this close companionship as inclination, the groom's boy and his like, except at stolen moments, being for Dacre things of the past.

This and various other reforms had been brought about by Mr. Fellowes and one tutor of an exceptionally strong mind.

While Dacre wriggled, his sister lay quite still on her back, with her legs stretched out, and with a considerable reach of stocking visible between the edge of her frock and her shoes. She had one arm curled round her neck, with the sharp elbow stuck out uncompromisingly in Dacre's direction. It was useful as a buffer and saved her many a lunge. The other hand held a book, a queer old edition of *Elia*, which she was deeply sunk in until she fell to watching Dacre, with a look of curious mockery on her red curled lips.

"I'd give my eyes to go to school!" burst out the boy after an interval of comparative silence. Mutterings never counted in Dacre.

"So you have said six times this afternoon, not to mention the mutters," said the girl. "What do you want to go to school for?"

"You know without any telling."

"I want to hear again."

"To jeer at a fellow, I suppose?"

"I won't jeer, and I might help you," she said with a laugh.

He looked at her face dubiously; it was inscrutable enough, but the mockery had left her lips.

"I want to go; I hate to be here; Greggs is big enough fool, but not quite so much as the others; he ain't all bad, I'll say that. But what's he to other

boys, and cricket, and football, and larks—oh, you know!”

“I wonder why on earth they let you read ‘Tom Brown,’ when such heaps of books are forbidden,” said Gwen reflectively. “They have brought all this on themselves,” she added, knitting her brows in the exact manner of her mother. “We have to bear what we earn—we hear that often enough; I don’t see why they shouldn’t apply it to themselves. Dacre, you’re an awful ass; if I wanted all those things I should have had them long ago.”

“All very well to say that,” grunted the boy; “I’d like to know how.”

“I’ll tell you,—I’d worry till I got them.”

“I worry pretty well as it is,” he said, with a self-satisfied grin.

“Yes, in a stupid, squally way. You get into a rage, and make a row and an ass of yourself generally; then you get punished and repent, or pretend to,—anyway, nothing is heard of you till the next bout. You might be a dead cat for all the importance you are—of course you’re forgotten, and they go on working in peace.

“Now, if I wanted a thing, and wanted it badly, I should take good care never to be forgotten; I should let them see there was to be no peace as long as I was in the house; I should make myself felt from the garrets to the kitchen;—I should gain my end,” she concluded with calm finality.

By this time the sun had forsaken their tree and had flickered on to one nearer the west, and in the evening light her face gleamed out almost ghastly in its pallor.

"Gwen, you're queerer and queerer! Why don't you do all this for yourself? You are quiet enough now, nothing only sulky: why don't you do what you say I ought to yourself?"

"For what?" was the sharp retort. "I don't want boys and cricket and football and larks."

"What do you want then?"

She jumped up from her pillow and looked out after the westering sun, her eyes dark and dilated, her red lips parted.

"What do I want?" she slowly repeated. "I want—oh, you would not understand what I want, but worrying won't get it."

She caught up her book again and threw herself face downwards on the sward.

"That's the way! You'll never tell me anything," said Dacre angrily.

"I'll tell you one thing, and that is, I'll help you to go to school; and you'll go if you aren't a common ass, and if you'll do all I tell you."

"Golly! I'll do anything in the world for you if you'll only get me out of this hole," he blurted out in a spluttering fit of gratitude. "Perhaps, even, I might help you to get what you want, if you didn't make such a deadly secret of it," he added, looking at her as if he might somehow extract it from her unawares.

But her lips were tightly shut, and her eyes looked dead and cold.

"One might as well expect to get blood from a turnip," muttered Dacre, in the choice vernacular of the groom's boy. "Oh Lord! that brutal bell; lessons again! But you like 'em," he said, raising himself slowly and turning on her vindictively.

"There's nothing else to like. Pick up your book and come. I hate to look at Gregg's eyes when we are late ; I think he had cats for his ancestors, and not very long ago either—when he talks quick he always spits. Oh, that vile bell ! we may as well run ; he can't see us from the schoolroom window, or I wouldn't give him that much satisfaction."

"When will you begin the help?" panted Dacre, as they pulled up at the nearest point out of sight of the schoolroom.

"I'll think to-night and tell you. Ugh, Dacre ! wipe your face, you get so perspirationy after the shortest run ; I never do."

"No thanks to you, when one can see through you for thinness."

The next evening, when lessons were put away and the schoolroom tea over, Gwen, instead of absorbing herself in a book until bedtime, as she generally did, took a restless fit. She moved about in a noiseless, sweeping way she had, threw the window open breathlessly, and craned her head far into the breezy night.

A sudden gust that was carrying on a wild dance with some maple leaves caught sight of her hair and seized on it as a new plaything, or perhaps mistook it for some of the orange-gold leaves, and swept great lengths of it out among them till her white face seemed caught in a whirling net of brilliant gold. When she drew back at last, panting, she shut the window, and went over to Dacre.

"You're pretty tidy," she said, "for you ; but you might just take that black smudge off your nose. Do I look right ?"

"You look as mad as a hatter, but you generally do that, only I think your hair makes you look madder than ever."

She caught her hair bodily, gave it a violent shake, then took out her handkerchief and rubbed her cheeks until they glowed scarlet.

"What are you at, making yourself like a turkey-cock?" demanded Dacre.

"We'll both go into the library," said she, in a sort of studied calm. "I heard them go in after dinner, and they think I'm sick and don't eat if I'm white. Come on quick, now, while I'm red."

Dacre came near and looked into her face with some curiosity.

"You're madder to-night than I ever saw you," he observed. "You can go; you will if you want to, of course,—I'll not, not if I knows it."

"If you don't I shall do all I possibly can to keep you at home."

That and her look were decisive. He followed her with an angry snort, and they went swiftly down the low, broad oak stairs, with their winding, curved balustrade, down through the softly-carpeted corridors. When they reached the library door they stood, with one accord, stock still.

"You're whiter than ever," said he.

"Wipe your nose; you've rubbed the black all over it instead of off it. Am I red now?"

"You're magenta."

"Come on, then."

When the door opened slowly, and showed both their children standing in the soft glow of the lamps, Mr. and Mrs. Waring started up in some dismay.

"Is anything wrong, my dears? Are you ill?" cried Mr. Waring, while his wife came forward nervously, and peered anxiously at the two from head to foot.

By this time even Gwen's courage had waned, and the old feeling of having come to judgment was fast gaining on her. Dacre was already a flaccid lump.

"You appear well, dears," said Mrs. Waring, raising herself from her inspection; "and Gwen's colour seems to me to be healthier than usual."

Gwen felt smothered and speechless, but she made a vehement effort, and got out in an appealing hushed kind of way,—

"We are quite well, mother, but we came to see you; we thought you might have time to talk to us and let us stay a little, we have been good at our lessons so long."

The child lifted her eyes as she spoke, and turned them hungrily from father to mother in a way that sensibly embarrassed them.

Mr. Waring took his finger from between the pages of a book, came forward, and looked searchingly into his child's face and then at his wife, who seemed too astonished to take any active part in the proceedings.

"Will you not sit down?" he said politely, pulling a couple of chairs towards the pair. "Pray sit down. You have no objection, dearest, have you?"

"No, oh no, I am very pleased indeed, and it is also very pleasant to hear you are advancing in your studies," said Mrs. Waring rather supinely. There seemed so very little one could say to one's children. Mrs. Waring passed her small hand across her brow,

and tried to look unpreoccupied ; but it was hard not to show feeling when a valuable train of thought was broken, and hours of good work rendered null and void by this unfortunate intrusion.

Her husband felt keenly for the gentle little woman, and naturally a slight feeling of irritation smote him as he turned his gaze on his inconvenient offspring, who bore it in stolid silence.

Dacre cast one rapid murderous look on his sister, then he sullenly accommodated himself to his surroundings, and sat on like a log.

As for Gwen, her tears were so near the surface that she had to swallow them with a gulp, her eyes grew dull and lifeless, the brilliant colour had all faded, and her cheeks had a ghastly, streaky, livid look, from the scrubbing.

"Would you like something to eat, my dears?" said Mrs. Waring eagerly. She would not sit down, but hovered about her children ; she could not fathom Gwen's horrid look of temper, and by this time the streaky cheeks had quite a revolting look. Her mother started at sight of it, and whispered in a perfectly audible voice,—

"Her skin seems unclean and mottled. Dearest, I will speak to Mary—a Gregory's powder I should recommend."

Gwen's flush deepened the streaks to lines of blood, and she could hardly keep from shrieking out her wrath and indignation, but she controlled herself, and said, in a harsh, level voice,—

"We would like nothing to eat, thank you, we've had our tea ; we came to see you, you don't want us. Dacre, I think we might go."

Then, to the absolute staggering of the boy, she turned, caught his hand, and, dragging him along by it, went up and stood before her parents, her eyes gleaming strangely.

"Good-night, mother ; good-night, father—oh, good-night !"

"Good-night, my dears," said Mr. Waring blandly, and seeing that they still waited he stooped down stiffly, and kissed the foreheads of both of them ; then, with the air of a man who has done his duty, he remarked,—

"Dacre's health seems to be more robust than his sister's ; I think you are wise in recommending something of an anti-febrile nature."

The children were half out of the room by this time, and Mrs. Waring's eyes followed them with a puzzled stare. Something had evidently been forgotten.

"Ah, of course," she cried, her face lighting ; and running forward she put a soft detaining hand on a shoulder of each of her children, and laid a small kiss on the middle of Gwen's cheek. Then she stooped to Dacre, and did the same by him.

She wondered a little, as she went up to Mary's room, why Gwen shuddered when she touched her.

"I wonder if she's feverish," she thought. "Oh, what agonies of responsibility parents have to endure," she sighed, with yearning self-pity, as soon as she reached the head of the stairs.

When the children got to the nursery, Dacre faced his sister with glaring eyes.

"Beast !" was his sole observation.

"Let me alone, oh, let me alone !" she cried. "And, Dacre, open the windows, I feel smothered."

"You should live on the top of a windmill," he grumbled, but he did as she bade him, and watched her with some puzzled concern.

She soon recovered from her smothering, drew in her head, and leaned against the window in silence for a few minutes; then she said, with calm decision,—

"Oh yes, you can go to school; there is neither reason nor justice in your staying here. They might have prevented it to-night if they'd liked."

"How?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand."

"Well, of all the beasts! Girls' secrets are such fools of things, too! Don't look like that, it's awful, with your scratchy face."

"Oh, go to bed, do!"

"I wish *you* would; I think you are going to be sick; I'll call Mary."

"Dacre, don't dare to, I'm as well as anything. I wish I was a witch, and could fly over those trees on a broomstick."

She peered eagerly out of the window, out over the tree tops, and the whirling leaves, up into the dark heavens.

"You look witchy enough now, with your awful yellow hair that looks as if it was alive with fire-flies."

"Dacre, go to bed, do; I want to think of the plan."

"Oh, if you want that, I'll clear; I'd have gone before only I thought you were going to be sick."

Gwen turned a half-mocking, half-wistful look upon him.

"You're a good old thing, and it isn't your fault if you are an ass, only I wish you weren't," she said to

herself when he had gone; "it wouldn't all be so wretched then."

She went off slowly to her little blue-and-white bedroom, and let Mary put her to bed in a cold silence, which she positively refused to break.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ins and outs and general details of Gwen's plan of campaign would in nowise interest, much less edify the moral reader. It is enough that the plan was a brilliant success, and its organisation and execution would have done credit to the Prince of Darkness himself. Her tactics were by no means volcanic; they were resolute, gradual, and in a way scriptural. Line upon line, precept upon precept, first the seed, then the blade, then the full corn in the ear. When the initial steps had been taken, just leaving the air well charged with vague apprehension, and the minds of men ripe for some new development, active measures set in, in a careless, unconscious sort of way, as if the divine order of things had just received a passing jar, no more. But then this jar continued and increased and grew in dimensions, till the very bones of the jarred shook in their skins, and it was as much as their souls could do to hold themselves in their bodies.

Three months after the plan's inception, the amazing goings-on of Dacre, the wild originality of his pranks, the consistent sustained *diablerie* of his outbursts, the terrible all-pervadingness of his personality, had succeeded in completely upheaving the souls of his parents, and filling the entire household with a fearful sense of

insecurity, as of a community conscious of the presence amongst them of an invisible infernal machine, which moves by some hidden power all over everywhere, and can neither be caught nor compassed.

Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes, who kept a close eye on the affairs of the Hall children, had felt now some time that there was too much subtlety in this departure of Dacre's to be all his own.

"The days of devil-possession are gone; I could swear it's Gwen," said Mrs. Fellowes one day, smiting her small hands together, and dropping a child's petticoat on which she had been sewing a button.

"I've been thinking so for some time," said her husband; "all the same, I hardly see where the 'swear' mends matters."

"Oh, never mind! When a woman's perturbed, she often relapses into original sin; it's a full year since I 'reckoned'—'swear,' at least, is cosmopolitan. I'll go up this minute and get to the truth of this; Gwen hasn't been near me for a fortnight, and I've been so busy, you see, I couldn't go near them."

"I shall go too, I must get a subscription for those miserable Gows from Waring; but, little woman, hadn't you better lie down? After five nights up with Jim Brown, even you must want rest!"

"Lie down! No, no; with this on my mind, why, I couldn't rest a minute."

After a rather ineffectual attempt to bring Mrs. Waring to a decent flesh-and-blood consistency, Mrs. Fellowes retreated to the schoolroom.

"She grows worse and worse," she muttered, as she let out some of her feelings in a sharp rap on the door.

Mr. Gedge, the present instructor, was not her

husband's choice ; he was launched on the children by a well-meaning uncle of Mrs. Waring's, who from time to time swooped down on the family in a protective if rather hawk-like fashion, and invariably set some reform afloat among man or beast.

In this last visit he had let Gedge loose in the schoolroom. The man was as little fitted to deal with the plan's ramifications as a babe unborn.

When Mrs. Fellowes went in she got a howl of welcome from Dacre ; Gwen gave her only a quiet handshake, but the warm light that flashed into her cold eyes told more than any howl. Mr. Gedge stood up wearily and looked pleased.

"Do sit down," said he, casting a furtive, fearful glance on Dacre.

He was in constant horrid dread of a new sensation. They were so diverse, so swift in succession, one never knew when one might not come on, and it might be embarrassing if set going in the presence of a lady.

Dacre, however, his familiar being otherwise engaged, was quiescent, and Gedge breathed freer.

"May I have Gwen for the afternoon?" asked Mrs. Fellowes.

She was amazed to see the hesitation on Gwen's face and the actual look of dismay on Dacre's, but she speedily fathomed the reason.

"I knew it," she said to herself ; "Gwen is the mover in the whole business." Then aloud, "Gwen, you will come, dear, Mr. Gedge's eyes have said 'yes' already."

Mr. Gedge had a lively though bashful admiration for the little American ; he beamed his assent in quite a sprightly way. "It will be one less to cope with," he

reflected, "and I can perhaps get my poor Amy's letter finished."

The devil, in a specially evil moment, had revealed to Mr. Gedge's pupils the existence of this sweet young woman, and had thereby added another hundredweight to the millstone already encircling the neck of her affianced.

Mrs. Fellowes looked with sudden sympathy at the young man, then with twinkling eyes at his charges; he seemed so ludicrously out of proportion to his task.

"Poor thing!" She thought it with such amused vehemence it almost got spoken aloud. "Poor thing, you shall have a peaceful afternoon for once!"

"Mr. Gedge, do give me Dacre too; do, just for one day! He shall go for a ride with Mr. Fellowes."

"Oh golly!" muttered Dacre, dancing in his glee.

Gwen's face grew brilliant with joy; she could now go with an easy conscience; she couldn't by any possibility have left Dacre alone, he was too utterly "an ass." She could now have a whole long afternoon to be happy in; she needn't think once all the time, only just laugh and play and let herself be kissed—she never by any chance ventured a kiss on her own account—and she would feel Mrs. Fellowes' soft hands on her head—she always brushed her hair for tea—and hear her soft voice, and it would stay in her ears making little tunes. And the Rector, he would be good too, and remain in the drawing-room after tea—he always did when they came—and he was always kind, and told such funny stories.

Gwen's contained joy broke out in a prolonged "Oh!"

Mrs. Fellowes looked rapidly round the handsome

room and out into the Park, the finest in the county, and back to the child's face.

"It is abominable, abominable," she thought angrily. "Just to be away from the place for a few hours transforms the child; she is simply beautiful this minute with that look—oh, it is outrageous! Gwen, love, run at once and put on your things, and, Dacre, run down into the porch, I'll tell Mr. Fellowes that you are going with him."

As soon as the children were gone she said kindly,—

"Mr. Gedge, you'll have a respite, anyway."

"Mrs. Fellowes," he burst out, "I am coming to see the Rector; I have endeavoured, and I truly hope conscientiously, to do my duty, but I find my present position altogether untenable. I am not a very strong man, Mrs. Fellowes, and I find that this life is fast undermining my constitution."

He paused for a moment; then he went on hurriedly, in a sudden impulse of confidence,—

"Mrs. Fellowes, forgive my troubling you with my affairs, but you are so very kind. I have hopes, very dear hopes, and from various strange sensations in the region of my heart when my struggles with Dacre have been specially trying and prolonged, I have reason to fear some fundamental lesion of the organ."

Mr. Gedge had just been reading up the heart in some medical journal; he had also lately ascertained that his maternal aunt had died of angina-pectoris, so he was naturally upset in his mind.

"If one has hopes, Mrs. Fellowes," he went on sadly, "one's duty seems to be to guard against anything that must interfere with such hopes, always supposing them to be lawful and right."

"Indeed, I quite agree with you," said Mrs. Fellowes with much heartiness, and with an unholy tendency to laughter,—“I agree with you, and, no doubt, as is the way of such things, your hopes are bound up in the hopes and happiness of another. For her sake alone you must consider your position seriously.”

“Yes, I will turn my thoughts to some other sphere of action; but before I leave here,” he added with solemn resolve, “I deem it my duty to my employers to represent to them the urgent advisability of sending my elder pupil to a public school. I know you agree with me in this, Mrs. Fellowes?”

“Agree with you! why, we have been fighting for it for years.”

“Then I may rely on your and your husband’s help in this matter?” he asked, looking rather askew admiration at her through his eyeglasses.

He had received a slight injury to one eye in his youth, and according to Dacre it was now “a game one.”

By these suggestions of Mr. Gedge it will be seen that Gwen’s leaven was working.

CHAPTER IX.

THE decree had gone forth, and Dacre was to go to Eton. Ancestral taint and sisterly guile had won the day, though not without a tough struggle. The idea of home culture, vague and ill-defined as it was, died hard, and Mr. and Mrs. Waring still bemoaned their fate daily in the intervals of work.

They were now much disturbed in their minds concerning the plan of religion which they had conceived in the tender youth of their offspring, and which had been worked up to with rather more consistency than usually characterised those plans of theirs that dealt with outside and minor matters.

That it should have occurred to Henry and Grace Waring was the most remarkable part of this plan. They both looked upon religion as they did upon art, as a thing apart and on a somewhat low level, to be considered in leisure hours. In some phases of mind they might indeed almost have been said to glory in it, and to rejoice that the ages should own such a heritage, just as one might rejoice in the work of a great master.

They were, of course, both too appreciative of good literature to have neglected the Bible; they knew

every twist and turn in it, as they did of the Koran and the Brahminic Vedas.

As for doubts and things of that sort, they never, so to speak, went in for them, their minds were not of that order. In the same way the truths or the untruths of Christianity seemed to them an interesting enough study between working hours. In Mrs. Waring's case, perhaps, they appealed fitfully to some part of herself she never quite understood, that same sentimental part that often suffered a keen stab,—for instance in the case of the Rectory babies, and sometimes from a strange look in Gwen's face. But she had almost ceased to speculate upon these odd sensations, and was inclined to put them down to a strain of puritan blood that had somehow trickled into the more vigorous fluid of her fighting forebears, which perhaps might also account for her preference for Christianity over other creeds.

It will be seen, then, that the mere reception or rejection of Christianity by their children was a matter of no vital importance to these parents. They were, however, intensely interested in the result itself—that was quite another thing. The phases of mind the function must unfold, seemed certainly a subject worth research, and filled them with the keenest interest.

"You are quite sure, dearest," said Mr. Waring, a few days before Dacre's departure was to take place, "that Mary has not tampered with the minds of our children?"

"I am certain—quite certain. She has certainly seemed to resent my orders in this matter, but she has not disobeyed them."

Mrs. Waring sat down and tried to take up the

thread of her thoughts, but it was broken again in a minute by Mr. Waring pushing back his chair suddenly, and looking at her in a disturbed, restless way. She went over, laid her hand on his shoulder, and looked anxiously into his face.

"Are you troubled, love? can I not help you?"

"I should be glad, my Grace, if I felt more convinced that the minds of our children are really a blank as far as any knowledge of religion goes."

"I am sure Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes——"

"Dearest, the idea is revolting! Fellowes, a gentleman! And his wife! She is your friend, that is sufficient." He bowed as his grandfather, the courtliest man in a courtly court, might have done. "But I fear that when very young the children may have received foreign impressions; the class that people the stable-yard are often quite versed in what they term 'the truths of the Gospel.'"

"But so long ago?"

"Not so very long after all, and impressions are most tenacious things, more especially erroneous ones. Does the fact not hamper us daily, dearest? Even this moment," he went on musingly, "after all these years, I can recollect praying at my mother's knee with a quite astonishing fervour, which now seems next to reasonless, and yet I doubt if the impression of that fervour will ever leave me."

"In our children's case we can only hope, dearest," she said.

Her husband's fear depressed her; she was herself feeling just then, and rather to her cost, how very remarkably clinging old impressions were. They were hovering round her at that very moment, and entwining

her in a maze of the old dead visions of dead days, when she was a child herself, and wore long lawn night-gowns with frilled sashes, and said prayers. She went over to the fire to make it up, and ended by putting it out.

"Oh, Henry," she said at last, from the hearthrug, shivering a little, "what if, after all, we might just as well have allowed our children to run along the common groove like those very fat children of Mrs. Manners? They seem wholesome and not devoid of intelligence. And then they are handsome and well grown, yet the boy is ten and not even in Latin—Mrs. Manners considers that in ten years the fact will make no difference in his career. On the contrary, look at Dacre; think of the load of anxiety and thought we have expended upon him, and yet——" She broke off sadly.

Her husband regarded her for a minute with sympathising eyes.

"Dearest," he said at last softly, "you are apt to forget the fact that our poor Dacre is—I hate to hurt you, dear, but you know it—he is most unfortunately a throwing-back, and must follow the fate of his kind. He must enter the army;—it is deplorable, but so it must be."

"The army!" murmured the small woman, wringing her hands softly. "It is sad, it is hard on us. I do think, dearest, we might have been more successful in our children."

"Our child," interrupted her husband.

Her eyes clouded, and she repeated hesitatingly, "Yes, our child—Gwen's abilities are considerable."

"Yes," said her father with unmixed satisfaction;

"my hopes rest on Gwen, her abilities are indeed most gratifying."

For one fleeting moment, which she blotted from her memory with shame, her mother almost wished they weren't; she might then be easier to get some knowledge of, and not quite so alarming.

CHAPTER X.

THE function was arranged for a certain Wednesday in February, the day before Dacre was to leave for school, and the children had been given formal notice to appear in the drawing-room at three o'clock. They were now waiting in the schoolroom speculating on the event. They knew it must be something very unusual, from the fact of the drawing-room, of all places in the world, being appointed as the scene of action.

It was at the end of a dismal six weeks of holidays, mostly spent, by reason of colds, between the nursery and the schoolroom. Indeed, it had been the very flattest bout of holidays the two had ever yet endured.

Dacre's object being attained, there was no further use for organised "cussedness," so he had relapsed into his ordinary state of gusty wickedness, which, being natural, was nothing very especial in the way of a pastime,—quite unlike the six months' excitement of his raid on society. There was nothing to supply the place of this now, nothing—neither cricket, football, nor even riding: so small wonder that life was pretty much of a blank to the boy.

It was even worse for Gwen, the mover and the mainspring of the enterprise. When she found herself

landed victoriously on the threshold of her goal, with her conscious triumph there got mixed other sensations of a more unpleasant nature. The horrible feeling of flat inaction after the whirl of action, that plays havoc with all great conquerors, seized on this little one, and did the same by her. And then she had none of the fêtes and the follies that follow hot on the heels of other conquerors for their consolation. She felt the most miserable victor breathing; her soul was brimming with bitterness, and the overflow vented itself largely on Dacre's luckless pate.

The children, having nothing to go upon, could arrive at no very satisfactory solution of their mysterious summons. Mary's look, as she smoothed Gwen's hair, put Dacre's collar straight, and kept on fussing round when she had no more to do, made things look more mysterious still; then she sighed like a steam-engine the whole time, which added a presage-of-ill character to the mystery that irritated Gwen horribly.

"For goodness' sake, Mary, do go!" she cried at last in despair, "go! You are like the old turkey when her ducklings ran out into the lake the other day."

Mary straightened her glasses and looked at the child. "'Tis brains is the matter with you, my dear," she said; "however could you guess at the very thoughts as were running in my head? I was thinking of the creature, flapping there helpless, and I was lik'ning myself to her that very minute. Master Dacre would never have guessed it, bless him!"

Gwen felt she had scored a point, and continued,—

"What is going to happen to us, Mary?"

Mary regarded her in silence.

"If you know you might tell us," said the girl impatiently; "or," she added scornfully, "are you still more like the turkey, and are only frightened because you know so little?—you look like that."

"Oh Lord!" muttered the woman under her breath, feeling very hard hit; but she replied with dignity, "My dear, it certainly ain't my place to tell you what your parents have thought fit not to acquaint you with."

"They see fit to acquaint us with nothing, as far as I can see. Well, as you can't tell us, or don't know anything to tell us, do go away, please. You move about so, and look so queer, you make one think that a horrible new thing is coming on us—so do go, please. I'm not cross or nasty, only I feel queer myself and frightened. I could scream and yell and howl this minute—oh, I wish Mrs. Fellowes was here."

"She is coming, my dear," said Mary, looking anxiously at the girl.

"Oh, she often looks like that," said Dacre consolingly; "I believe she is mad—she is dying to squeal and screech, and yet she is as quiet as an old rat; I believe myself one good roar would do her good."

Mary was a sensible body, and knew when a thing was beyond her powers; she said nothing, but went down and intercepted Mrs. Fellowes on her way to the drawing-room and carried her off.

"Is Gwen well, Mary?" she asked, as they went upstairs.

"Eats and sleeps well, ma'am, but she has an over-active brain, ma'am, I should say, and if 'tis, 'tis only God can help her," whispered Mary solemnly.

Gwen had recovered by this time, and she and Dacre were engaged in a wrangle, stormy on Dacre's side, sarcastic and calm on Gwen's. At sight of Mrs Fellowes they left off.

"Oh you dear, you dear!" cried Gwen, sweeping up to her, and taking her kiss with a sort of gasp; "we feel awful, as if some new horror was coming on."

"You'll stand by us, Mrs. Fellowes? Do you think they might repent of Eton? Gwen gets mad when I say that, but, you know, no fellow knows what they'll do next," Dacre added plaintively.

"Dacre, I wonder if you know how horribly impertinent you are? If you belonged to me and spoke of me like that, I'd cut you for a week!"

"Oh, but you're quite different; of course no one would speak of you like that—Oh, come in!"

A new footman, a tall, awkward creature, who found his brains softening in this astonishing family, had been giving a succession of small knocks for the last five minutes; at last he supplemented them by a choking cough.

"There is that giraffe," said Gwen impatiently; "I suppose we are wanted! Mrs. Fellowes, look at him," she whispered; "everybody who comes to this house looks like that in a week, and as for Mary, she is awful, going about in a muttering way and glaring at me as if I was a penny show. The tutors are the same, even that great leggy gawk—oh dear, what's the matter with us all?"

"And another thing—oh, wait just a moment, they'll never know if we're one minute late or twenty; they don't want us a bit,—oh no, they never do; I tell you, they are quite happy, and oh, so busy, so appallingly

busy. I want to tell you another horrible habit the people here have. I must tell you all this," she added, seeing Dacre's rather astonished face, "it has all just come up to the surface of me. The people in this place always whisper in the most diabolical way; there is never a single sound in these corridors, never, and that's why I often nearly burst to howl and screech. Dacre is an idiot as every one knows, and he says I'm mad."

"Hush, child!"

"Oh well, come on then; but there's not an atom of hurry, they don't want us."

"Mrs. Fellowes isn't such an ass as not to know that," said Dacre scornfully; "but I want to know what's on in there, so does she, so come on."

"It's nothing nice, you may be quite sure; it's probably got something to do with lessons. Perhaps they want to examine you before you go to school," added Gwen, with a fiendish laugh.

Her mouth was terrible in its hardness. Mrs. Fellowes stooped down quickly and kissed her on it.

"Gwen, love, you don't know; something very nice may be going to happen to you, the very nicest thing that has ever yet happened."

Gwen looked up at her astonished; some tone in her soft voice touched her.

"I wonder—" she said slowly, "I wish——"

"What dear?"

"Oh, I don't think I know," said she, with a short laugh. "Come on! Gru! look at the table covered with books and things! I knew it was an exam.! Look, Dacre!"

When her greetings to her host and hostess were

over, Mrs. Fellowes went over to her husband, who was standing by the table of books.

"One of the evidences of Christianity to be placed before the infant mind," he said softly, pointing to "Lord Amberley." "Another!" and he put his finger on Renan's "Life of Jesus."

"Good gracious! you'll stop that?"

"If I can—what's wrong with Gwen?"

"I don't know, I put my foot in it just now by pressing for an explanation."

Dacre, meanwhile, was feeling less than a worm under the concentrated gaze of his parents. After the first remarks concerning health addressed to both children, with a casual allusion to his projected departure for school for Dacre's benefit, and an earnest request from his mother to consider his teeth and his stomach, and to eschew sweetstuff, "the great temptation of public schools," she observed sadly, and when some supine observations with regard to things in general had been turned on Gwen, Mr. and Mrs. Waring looked appealingly at each other, and subsided into a silent and curious inspection of their son.

The dumb endurance of the boy showed a good deal of pluck; he merely wriggled spasmodically from time to time. But he had come to the extremest end of his tether, and was on the point of some outbreak, when deliverance reached him in a low, swift sigh from his mother, and a queer, sudden movement on his father's part, who pushed back his chair, loosed his wife's hand, with a deprecating "Pray, my love!" and began to speak in a general inoffensive way, fixing his gaze on no one in particular, to Dacre's infinite relief.

"There are subjects which are usually comprised in

the education of young children," said he, "which we, after deep and anxious thought, have seen fit to omit from the curriculum of our son and daughter. We have taken special pains to impress upon their various instructors, as also upon the persons appointed to their personal service, that a certain part of their minds should be kept free, entirely clear and free, from certain impressions; that they should remain, so to speak, a blank as far as regards this form of knowledge. The form of knowledge I allude to—" he continued, his eye falling once more on the luckless Dacre, who was drinking in his words with open-eyed wonder; and finding the boy useful as a target, he fixed him inexorably until the end of the discourse,—“The form of knowledge I allude to is that known as the knowledge of religion. It is sometimes called a sense, and has, in a manner, become so by heredity; but I doubt much whether it was innate in the race in the beginning. This point of view has of course powerful advocates, as we all know; at least,” he added, coughing nervously, “as Mr. Fellowes and his wife know. However, this question, though most interesting, is not necessary to my explanation.”

Here his eye, which had swerved for a moment, again caught Dacre's. “The reasons why we have insisted upon the denial of this knowledge to our children are manifold. Firstly, my wife and I consider that it is hardly fair to any human creature, with normal brain power in its young, receptive condition, to give this brain power a distinct bias with regard to the fundamental points of any science. I speak of it, not in the common, but in the original application of the word, which is merely empiric, and can certainly

not be looked upon as proven in any part,—however great its ethical value as a factor of culture may be,” he added, with an apologetic glance at the Rector. “For the same reason we have withheld geology and the advanced parts of several of the natural sciences, wherein is evolved the doctrine of evolution. But of these later.

“We have been more stringent in our regulations with regard to religion and its most advanced and refined development—that known as Christianity—because it enters so largely into all current questions, and entrenches, or at least the arguments of its exponents do, on so many of our more exact sciences. Another reason for withholding this knowledge was the strange methods so many of its disciples have of apprehending and applying it—even of considering its literature. The process of exclusion by which we have striven to our goal has, I fear, seemed to our dear friends here to-day an unwise one; but we have taken deep thought concerning this matter, and have taken no step lightly. We have awaited a state of consciousness in our children capable of receiving and judging the evidences of religion—more especially of that form of it known as Christianity—in an unprejudiced and reasonable manner, without bias, and with no early half-true, half-false impressions to confuse and mislead.

“Mr. Fellowes,” he concluded with solemnity, “we have done, as we consider, our duty, and in the best way we know of. Heredity and other inner influences will no doubt in some measure nullify our efforts, as will also the possible impressions—no doubt of a low order—which our children, in that period of mere physical development before the culture of their higher

parts began, may have received from outside ; but with these exceptions, I feel confident that, as regards all knowledge of religion, the minds of our children are a blank."

He was silent for a moment, and regarded the blanks with supreme satisfaction.

"Mr. Fellowes," he began again, "my wife and I are most anxious that our children should receive all the facts and arguments in favour of Christianity before the counter arguments are put before them, and in the most reasonable and enlightened manner. We have therefore invited you to be present to-day, and would feel ourselves under still one more obligation to you ——" here he looked from Mr. Fellowes to his wife, and so made one of them, "you who are so eminently fitted for the task—if you would make our children acquainted with the leading points in the history of religion. Would you also be so good as to direct them in their course of reading—our daughter at least, for Dacre, I believe, goes to Eton to-morrow? My wife and I have, as you know, been reluctantly obliged to relinquish our plans in this instance, owing to the pressure of strong ancestral bias, which will, I fear, also compel us to allow the boy to devote himself to brutal pursuits, and finally to enter the army. His ordinary culture, then, in religious matters, must be entrusted to the tutors of his school, who, no doubt, will fill his mind with strange vagaries. However," he went on, with a fixed melancholy look at the boy, "Dacre's intellect is not of a high order, it matters little ; but with Gwen very specially we desire your aid. We have discovered in her an unusual power of applying knowledge, and we would be glad if you

would examine her from time to time, that she may have a sound and reasonable knowledge of the arguments on the one side of this very interesting question, before she considers those on the other. We may be accused," he continued with a sigh, "and perhaps justly, of an unfair attempt to bias the girl's mind by not arranging that the study of the opposed facts and arguments should run side by side with these. But in this matter, I fancy," he said, with a little smile at his wife, "I fancy both my wife's and my hereditary tendencies have rather handicapped our intelligence, I do trust with no ill-results to our children," he added, embracing them both in one perturbed glance, and sitting down rather wearily.

CHAPTER XI.

DURING the latter part of this discourse Mr. Fellowes had been sorting the books on the small table, and had them now arranged in two separate heaps.

Gwen had been gradually edging her chair near Mrs. Fellowes, and her face was alight and eager.

Any new thing is always full of possibilities to a young creature moving out in all directions after experience. Besides, there was an undercurrent of quiet, anxious affection running all through her father's half-incomprehensible speech, that struck her, and kept down for the moment her usual defiant attitude of mind when had up before her parents.

Dacre's reflections, whenever the paternal eye was off him, partook of the most primitive simplicity.

"Thank goodness, I'm out of it. After all, it's a good thing to be an ass; and the army, oh golly! I never expected anything so sensible as that from 'em."

With that he winked lugubriously in Gwen's direction, and was rather upset by catching Mr. Fellowes' eye instead.

"I am quite certain that whatever you and Mrs. Waring have done in this matter has been done most conscientiously," said Mr. Fellowes, discreetly. "I am glad you think me capable of teaching your

children what, to my way of thinking, is the head and front of all knowledge—the knowledge of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ——”

Gwen looked at Mr. Fellowes with an astonished, eager gaze.

“This all sounds quite good,” she reflected; “but then, is it? Things are so very different from sounds,—every tutor, before he comes, sounds lovely.”

“But, Mr. Waring,” continued the Rector mildly, “if you entrust this matter to me you must also entrust me with the choosing of the books bearing on the subject; for instance, I should decidedly reserve this book, ‘Lord Amberley,’ also this, Renan’s ‘Life of Jesus,’ for that future period when you intend to give your children the evidences against Christianity. These, to my mode of thinking, would certainly be valueless for our purpose.”

“Indeed, Mr. Fellowes, you surprise me!”

He went over and glanced in rather a hurt way at the books. “I consider that work of Lord Amberley’s a most unimpassioned, useful, and an eminently trustworthy history of religions. Lord Amberley seems quite of our way of thinking—my wife’s and mine—for though he theorises so little, confining himself chiefly to the recording of facts, yet, in the whole tone of the work, one notices his predilection for that religion instituted by Christ over other faiths. I must say that I should have considered *that* book a valuable one in your cult; however, you are a specialist,” he remarked, magnanimously, “we, but dabblers in these matters; therefore we are bound to yield our judgment.

“As for Renan’s ‘Life,’ it appears to me to be a

charming composition, simple, and in style delightful. I should have thought it would have appealed pleasantly to the childish comprehension ; however, as you object, with, no doubt, full and sufficient ground for your objections, we will leave the matter entirely in your own hands and in those of your dear wife," he added, with a stiff bow in her direction, "a most excellent helpmeet in this as in all other things."

"Oh, Mr. Waring, please don't imagine that I meddle in all my husband's business!" cried Mrs. Fellowes, half-amused and half-angry; it was too abominable to be made a sort of co- or under-curate to her husband, even by this pair of curiosities. "I should never dream of interfering in the religious instruction of any one, either young or old; and if I had any mind to, I assure you my husband would soon strangle that tendency in me."

"Oh dear me!" murmured Mr. Waring, "we always act so much together that I never thought of interference in such a connection; pray excuse me, dear Mrs. Fellowes," he entreated nervously.

Mrs. Fellowes could have slain him and herself. She kept her eyes carefully turned from her husband, but she felt his silent malicious laughter to the very tips of her fingers.

"Mr. Waring, there is nothing whatever to excuse; it is only a little silly clerical point of etiquette. You have no idea how the clerical mind runs to trifles. I am only beginning to get any correct notions, and I have been studying it now over eight years. It is much more interesting than geology," she continued, turning to Mrs. Waring and awakening her out of her reverie, "and requires quite as much hammering to get any-

thing worth having out of it. John quite agrees with me."

"Ah, Mrs. Fellowes, it is so easy for you to see fun in things," said Mrs. Waring in a pretty, wistful way; "it is quite a gift; I fear it has not been bestowed upon me."

"Good gracious, I should think it hadn't!" said Mrs. Fellowes to herself; "if you had a spark of it you'd keep him in his right mind as well as yourself."

"Don't you think Dacre looks rather idiotic?" whispered Gwen suddenly to Mrs. Fellowes.

He certainly did, with his mouth ajar and the bright red tip of his tongue visible through his teeth.

"They always have that effect upon him," continued Gwen; "a frequent course of it would very soon land him in an idiot asylum."

"Hush, dear!"

Mr. Waring seemed now ill at ease, and not at all satisfied at the way things were shaping. The affair was missing fire both for him and for his wife; they wanted, so to speak, a thorough microscopic examination of their children; they wanted them then and there put out on the table and carefully gone over as a preliminary proceeding, even if as yet no final and systematic classification of their contents could be attempted.

Where was the result of research to come in if the one was to be shipped off to school the very next day, and the other to be turned over to Mr. Fellowes? Mrs. Waring's mind also ran in this groove.

"Will there not be an examination now at once?" she asked, in pained surprise. "I quite understood this was our arrangement."

"I too, dear love; we must discuss the matter. Mr. Fellowes,—ahem, my wife and I thought it might be as well to examine the state of our children's minds now at once; it seems important to ascertain clearly how far our plans have been successful, and in this we might be of some help to you."

Mr. Fellowes looked gravely annoyed. Dacre started violently and nearly took the tip off his tongue, and Gwen's face fell; she straightened herself and a transfiguration fell upon her; her mouth hardened, her colour faded to a dull grey, and her eyes took on the masked look that Mrs. Fellowes so detested to see.

"Always the same!" muttered Gwen, "always the same! I was beginning to think that with Dacre going to school and everything we might be let off and have tea instead. Look, there it is, getting stone cold, they've clean forgotten it! I never can answer a word when they question me; it's very unfair to force one into looking like a fool when one isn't. Dacre, of course, might be a cabbage this minute—look at him! They treat one's brains like puppets, to dance when they whistle!"

"Gwen, dear Gwen, you let your tongue go mad!"

Gwen winced; she prided herself a good deal on her strength and reticence.

"As for the examination," Mrs. Fellowes continued, "it is quite natural your father and mother should arrive at some idea of your state of mind, and as they start on the premise that you know nothing they won't expect you to shine."

"You don't know," said the girl surlily; "one can't argue from experience with regard to them ever; they are as reasonless and as unjust in their expectations as they are in everything."

"Gwen, I am ashamed of you; you are unjust, and no one else; and rather rude, seeing that any questions you have to answer will be asked by Mr. Fellowes. Now listen, either your father or my husband is going to speak."

"Your father and mother," said Mr. Fellowes, coming over and standing so that he could watch both of the children, "have asked me to put a few simple questions to you."

The countenances of Mr. and Mrs. Waring fell visibly; this informal, good-humoured, casual way of carrying on, was not the sort of thing they had expected.

"One should make a specialty of every form of knowledge, however trivial," said Mr. Waring, in a low voice; "we should have put ourselves in a position to be competent personally to conduct this affair."

His wife looked comprehension, and clasped his hand a trifle harder.

No one but themselves and possibly their Creator had any idea of the amount this unfortunate couple had to endure.

"If I ask you anything," went on the Rector, "and you can't answer it, you mustn't mind, for, as you just now heard from your father, you are not expected to know anything definitely."

Gwen looked up with a quick, sarcastic question in her face.

Mr. Fellowes laughed. "You think in that case I had better hold my tongue; well, perhaps I had, but even if one gains no absolute knowledge of the question asked, from the answers to it, one sometimes finds out other things just as useful. In your classical

readings you have come across many allusions to the gods of Greece and Rome, haven't you ? ”

“ Yes,” they assented. “ That wasn't much of a poser,” reflected Dacre glibly.

“ On the whole, what did you think of them ? ”

“ They were pretty mean,” said Dacre, with conviction.

“ They were just like other people, only stronger, and better looking, and bigger,” said Gwen.

“ Would you be inclined to think any one of them capable of any great or stupendous work ? ”

“ Goodness no ! ” said Gwen ; “ they had a great deal too much to do with their little things ; punishing mortals, too,—that took up half their time.”

“ Well, then, who do you imagine made the world ? —have you ever thought on the subject ? ”

“ This is most distressing,” whispered Mr. Waring ; “ he seems about to give all these rank hypotheses as facts ; this is childish, unworthy of Gwen's intellect ! ”

“ Dear love, you are unfair ; there is absolutely nothing proven on either side.”

“ But the counter arguments will not be presented as facts.”

“ The religious school has firm convictions and admits no hypotheses, I have heard. I confess this primitive mode rather interests me ; I wonder what Gwen's reply will be—hush, here it comes ! ”

“ I never could think of any one person undertaking such a work,” said Gwen, looking rather interested. “ I have always thought it was done by some ceaseless force that keeps things wound up.”

“ Do you think this force a beneficent one or the contrary ? ”

"Just as the humour takes it. It seems sometimes quite human in its tempers and its injustice ; rather capricious and old-womanish, too,—I often think that."

"Why?"

"Why! From the stupid times and places that earthquakes and waterspouts and things come; they hardly ever burst up or beat down desert islands or places like that; they always flock to populated places where people have been working for years to make themselves comfortable, and then all in a minute their work is undone and they may think themselves lucky if they aren't undone themselves. That sort of thing seems reasonless and like an old woman."

"Poor little foolish Gwen!" said Mrs. Fellowes, with such a funny look that Gwen had to laugh.

"When you are older," said Mr. Fellowes, "and know more, you won't be so final in your judgments. I'm going to tell you a fact now: will you believe it?"

Gwen got scarlet, the question seemed to her a reproach. "Mr. Fellowes, of course I will!"

"Then, Gwen, incredible as it sounds, a great, a glorious, and an Almighty God, a Spirit, who has had neither beginning nor end, made this world and keeps it going; and He is neither unjust nor unreasonable, capricious nor an old woman; though," he continued, to the open-eyed wonder of two in that room, "that you should accredit Him with all of these rather despicable qualities, does not astonish me in the least. Can you take my word for this fact I have told you? If you can't, say so. I need not ask you, however, you will be honest," he added, with a little amused laugh.

"It sounds rather queer and mixed up, considering

things as things are," said Gwen quaintly; "but I'd take your word for anything, Mr. Fellowes."

Just then some unlucky impulse guided her eyes in her mother's direction; a little softening towards her had seized on the girl for the instant, and her eyes had followed her thoughts; but they dropped like a shot, she stiffened, and loosed hold of the piece of Mrs. Fellowes' dress she had furtively been clinging to. Her mother's eyes were fixed on her in a puzzled, uncomprehending, rather disappointed way, horribly trying to her pride.

"I'll not say another word, not if they tear me with wild horses!" she said to herself tragically. "How dare she look at me like that! Now, Dacre, upon my word, I would not blame her if she did it to him! Dacre, you look awful!" she whispered viciously, "more beastly than human! Shut your mouth!"

And not another word could Mr. Fellowes, to his infinite relief, extract from the girl.

As for the boy, he was, on the face of it, hopeless; so in defiance of, and despite the protesting attitude of, the harassed parents, the Rector calmly put his foot down, and brought this ceremony to a conclusion.

"Mr. Waring," he said, "I think you must be satisfied that at least we have fairly virgin soil to work in."

Mr. Waring mumbled a gentle, "H'm!" He was thoroughly dissatisfied with the whole business.

"Will you allow Gwen to come to our house," went on Mr. Fellowes imperturbably, "every Tuesday and, let me see, every Friday afternoon?"

Gwen flashed a glance of delight on Mrs. Fellowes, and across her she flung a grin of defiance on Dacre.

“And to Dacre, if you will allow me, I will give one or two books to read when he happens to get time. Story books, Dacre—don’t squirm.”

Mr. and Mrs. Waring again looked with melancholy regret at each other, then extended the glance to their offspring. When it reached Mr. Fellowes a slight touch of gentle wrath had fluttered into it; but it was in vain to kick against the pricks, the proceedings were at an end, and another failure had died and was buried out of their sight.

And then they all drank some cold tea, and little atoms of cake were presented to the children, with a timid request from their mother to pick the currants out of them,—this bugbear of their infancy still clinging to the little woman,—and the drawing-room twilight was left at last free to the pair, who looked haggard, tired, and frustrated.

CHAPTER XII.

DACRE had been shot through Eton into Sandhurst, and Gwen was fast growing up and imbibing religious instruction in precisely the fashion one might have expected from her surroundings and her turn of mind.

She received the facts as facts, and grew very keen and eager over those that had any dramatic interest in them. She dug into their depths and revelled in them as any other boy or girl of sound intellectual capacity would do, when they were put as Mr. Fellowes put them. The unsatisfactory part of the business was when the horrible critical faculty of the girl began to ransack the facts, and the theories hung on them, and to turn them inside out, and to compare and classify them with an honest downright unscrupulousness that no girl suckled on the Bible could ever find it in her heart to use; no matter what her opinions might be,—or rather her own opinion of her opinions,—and the summing up of Gwen's searchings and comparings was monotonous and commonplace enough.

"The whole scheme is very fine," she said one day; "it is a perfect idyll in its way, and divine from the mere exaltation and grandeur of it; but where any

proof of a personal God comes in I can't see, any more than in any of the other creeds. They all seem to be chips off the same block. The ideal God seems universally human—this Jewish one with the rest. He is feeble and tyrannical, and He, in the old Testament, is so inconsistent ; and in the New—well, after all, that is only rather a more modern reflection of the Old. As for Christ, we know so little of Him,—and then when all's said, His loveliest and best thoughts were also thought in the Vedas by the Brahmins. It is wonderful beyond comprehension to me how so many have lived and died for such myths. The greatest and divinest quality of God seems to me to be His inexorableness, and even that failed Him more than once at a pinch."

"It is a sense wanting in me," she often told Mr. Fellowes ; "the sense of religion, as in Dacre the sense of poetry ; you can't supply it, no one can. I lose an infinite deal, I know ; your face literally shining over these things tells me so, plainer than a thousand words. I would give anything to experience such rapture, which is itself divine ; but I couldn't to save my life—it's curious !"

"Dacre tells me," she began suddenly another day, "that he quite believes in Christianity. Now, if his shallow, feeble acceptance of the thing—and he says it is just like all the other fellows' beliefs—is accepted, average Christianity must be poor stuff. I will wait until I get a better hold on it than that, before I say anything definite about believing or disbelieving. I say merely, the scheme does not appeal to me ; the fault is in myself, no doubt ; your judgment is sound in all other things, I quite believe it is just as sound in this."

On her seventeenth birthday, Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes gave her an edition of Browning.

"The parts she understands will be a revelation to her," Mr. Fellowes said, "and those she doesn't will serve as a brain tonic, for she will be sure to thresh them out with blood-curdling thoroughness."

They were all this and more, as Mr. Fellowes felt to his cost when a few days later she brought him "Caliban on Setebos."

"Now here," she said, "is my exact impression of the Christian God. I wonder if I shall ever change it, and by what process? I must be in a horribly unfinished initial state, if I can think side by side with a brutal creature like that. It's queer,—I am not altogether like him in other respects," she added, with a laugh.

Mr. Fellowes answered her, as he always did, with perfect good humour and sound good sense.

It was hard, uphill, melancholy work for him, but he did it like a man, and as well as he knew how—he tried to hope, and left the rest with God.

Mrs. Fellowes did her little part as soon as the solemnities were at an end. She seized on the girl, and petted and made much of her, and opened out her mother's heart to her.

"She must learn what love is, then perhaps she will stop prying about after justice and other matters. Besides, it is absolutely necessary she should before she has children of her own. She must be bathed in it, so that she actually has to absorb it, as children do nourishment in their bath of veal broth. I shall keep driving it into her at every possible opportunity. It would be an awful satisfaction if just once in a while

she would let one get a real good glimpse into her, to see how it works. I hate doing things in the dark !”

“But you do get a sight of the result sometimes. I remember myself having had several. I believe the girl has an immense power of affection,” said Mrs. Fellowes.

“Mercy on us ! As if I did not know that ! When it does break out, an earthquake is a fool to it ; but then the eruptions are always so sudden, and the calming down so preternaturally swift, that when they happen one is far too overwhelmed to have any time or faculty left for observation, and one never dares to go back on those outbursts, as you very well know. Oh, my Gwen, my poor, poor little Gwen, God will have to help your husband very considerably !”

And so Gwen grew up and her story began.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE very air of Gwen's two rooms, the bedroom and the dressing-room off it, shimmered with excitement. It glowed in the soft light of the innumerable wax candles with which Mary had studded the tables ; it hung in the rose-pink curtains ; it shone in the leaping blue flame of the fire ; it was everywhere, and most inconveniently so in the fingers of the new lady's maid, a creature of sentiment, who was putting the finishing touches to her young mistress's bodice, while Mary was trotting round restlessly, disturbed in every individual hair of her head, casting rapt glances at Gwen and furtive ones at the door.

At the sound of a footstep on the stairs she gave a sudden start and her face lighted, but it shaded as suddenly.

"Only Mrs. Fellowes !" she murmured, and she showed her in with some grimness.

Mrs. Fellowes stopped on the threshold and took in Gwen leisurely, with a half-choked gasp of wonder ; then she went over and kissed her.

"Gwen, love, you *are* beautiful ! I never knew it before."

Gwen looked up at her, then turned to the glass and

laughed. "I am," she said, "I am beautiful, and I never knew it before!"

Then she stood up and shook down the soft, gleaming folds of her tulle-shrouded silk and straightened herself.

It was her first long dress, and added two inches to her height.

"Look, I am changed; I am a new creature; I am afraid of nothing! I feel like a knight-errant, setting forth on his quest; his was glory, mine——" she paused.

"What's yours?" said Mrs. Fellowes, smiling on her.

"Mine? Mine's glory too."

She paused again, and a sudden trouble leaped into her face.

"But it's due to me, see. Why not?" And her great eyes flashed triumphantly into the glass. "'*I will attain*' like Paracelsus."

She laughed again, but her mirth had a jar in it.

"He went the wrong way about it," remarked Mrs. Fellowes placidly; "take care you don't do the same!"

"He was a fraud to begin with; I'm not, neither in brain nor body."

Mrs. Fellowes looked at her critically. "The outside of you is flawless enough, and, goodness knows! you are all there as far as brain goes. But I'm not so sure as to the inside of you; there, an inch or so to the left of that diamond star, I believe you are perfectly empty!"

"Ugh! That's empty of course, except for the bits of you and the Rector it holds; there's been nothing to fill it."

"A thing must have a capacity for holding before it can hold, my good child, and original capacity dwindles from disuse, as your father's daughter must know. Atrophy is the word in your jargon, isn't it?"

"Oh, all glory doesn't come through that mawkish muscle! I have lived for nineteen years without anything to try the holding capacity of mine, and I can go on for a while yet and get my glory through other channels."

"No, you can't; a woman's crown of glory comes through her heart, or it isn't worth the wearing; her heart leads her reason—and is often the surer guide into the bargain."

"Why do you speak like this," said the girl, flushing, and flashing out a white arm towards her, "on my coming-out night? It isn't fair of you!"

"You brought it on yourself, my Gwen; you're setting out on a wrong tack. Let yourself go, child, be natural, and strive after—nothing. All good will come to you by Divine right."

A sudden chill ran down Mrs. Fellowes' back, and a horrid little song began to croon in her ears. "Through much tribulation" were the words of it, and it kept on by fits all that evening.

"Turn round again and let me look at you, dear. Ah, I feel as if it were the coming-out night of my own child!"

There was a quick, short catch in her voice. "Kiss me, Gwen; and, darling, don't think of victory, there's blood in the very thought! The head and front of a woman's life is love,—God's, and mother's, and man's!

"You've forgotten your audience," said Gwen sarcastically; "I know nothing of the two first, the third will come, I suppose, in time—by all accounts, it comes always to the beautiful; but I shall not know what on earth to do with it when it arrives, and oh! I don't want it! I want to 'live at full pitch;' I couldn't manage that with my feet clogged with honey!"

"You want to be loved, my dear, to be loved, loved, loved; and when you are, you'll find out what an arrant little goose you are making of yourself."

The girl turned suddenly upon her and gave her one of her most volcanic hugs. When Mrs. Fellowes got out of it, panting, she set to putting Gwen's dress in order, with sundry soft touches to neck and arms.

"I do love nice, soft, girlish flesh," she said, with a little laugh. "Oh, how I do wish to goodness that John wasn't a parson this night of all others! I want dreadfully to see you there, but he can't come, it's impossible; you know Sam Tidd is dying, and even for you I couldn't go without him!"

"Mrs. Fellowes!" she cried, sweeping round, "are you not coming? This is, oh, this is awful! I never looked at your dress, I was so taken up with my own. Oh, to go alone with Lady Mary, and to my first ball!"

Her face was furious, and Mrs. Fellowes could have cried. "I did not tell you at first, I was so astonished at your brilliant completeness; I *am* sorry."

Gwen stamped.

"It is atrocious, abominable! To go alone, with no one in the room to care a rap how I look! You

can't help it, I know, but oh, you must see the horridness of the whole thing."

"The carriage is coming, darling, come down to your mother."

"I? Certainly not! Mary and Simpson!" she called.

"There, isn't it lovely?" said Gwen, as Simpson wrapped her in her cloak. "I do love the sheeny changes in white plush! Mrs. Fellowes, you will come down with me, won't you? I hardly know Lady Mary."

When they came to the foot of the stairs Mary came forward, and said, in a quick, frightened tone,—

"Miss Gwen, God bless you, dear! They will be proud of you! The room is well lighted, shall I open the door, Miss?"

"Did they ask for me?" demanded Gwen. She had let her cloak drop, and was turning slowly round, that the old woman might have a good view of her.

"Ask, Miss!"—She broke off.

"I know they did not, and they don't want me either, and Mrs. Fellowes isn't coming—did you know that? I am glad you like me, Mary!"

She stooped suddenly seeing a tear on Mary's cheek, and kissed it into a wet smudge on the bed of wrinkles, then she turned and kissed Mrs. Fellowes lightly, and walked down the great hall like a young queen setting out on a triumphal progress.

When Gwen dropped her cloak and displayed herself for Mary's admiration, she had two spectators she certainly never bargained for.

A wave of the universal excitement had somehow

reached Mr. and Mrs. Waring in their learned retirement, probably carried there by Mary's frequent appearances for trivial causes,—she dared not make any definite suggestion, for fear of Gwen's most inexorable wrath.

"My love," said Mr. Waring at last, "something unusual seems to be the matter!"

Mrs. Waring's brows knitted as usual, then gradually cleared.

"Yes, I really believe this is the occasion of Gwen's first ball. I remember now Lady Mary mentioning something about it, and—ah, yes, don't you remember you gave Mrs. Fellowes a cheque for some dresses, and other things to do with balls? Ah, nine o'clock, is it really? And I fancy I hear a carriage—didn't Lady Mary say she would come for her? I think, dear," she said, "I think, dear, I should like to see Gwen."

"And I too," said Mr. Waring, standing up with quiet eagerness. "Shall we go to her room? I suppose we might do so," he added, half fearfully.

It certainly did seem rather a liberty on their part.

"Oh yes, I think that perhaps she might like it."

So they opened the door, and were just about to set forth, when the sight of her in shimmering soft waves of silk and tulle, her round column of a neck poised like that of an empress, and her arms thrown out gracefully that Mary might see the whole of her, arrested the two, and held them in a silent spell, standing hand in hand on the threshold. Then, hand in hand still, they went back into the library, as if in a dream, and over to the deep embrasured window

that opened on the carriage drive, and listened to the very last sound of Lady Mary's wheels. When they came back to the fire there was a tear in Mrs. Waring's eye, and her husband felt disconsolate—just as if he had lost a good thought.

CHAPTER XIV.

If ever a girl's coming-out was a triumphal progress, Gwen's was. There was just the same suggestion of stifled groans, and hidden wounds, and silent blood streams in it as there is in the processions of all conquerors, and just the same cool indifference to this part of the show distinguished the girl's face, and added curiously to its charm.

As she swept calmly on her way her victims fell to right and to left of her without a groan or a murmur. Noisy appeal seemed quite out of the question in the presence of this magnificent, cool creature.

In her grand, scornful way she revelled in the glory of her march, and wore her laurels as if she had been used to them since her long-clothes' days. This sort of thing just suited her; it was so thoroughly just, so fair—her mere due and no more; and she felt neither elation nor any special gratitude in accepting it all.

For a whole year—first in the country, then in London—this went on, and Gwen never felt so unconsciously Christian-like in her life; she had no cause to rail against anything; she had no time to feel empty about the heart. Besides, her heart was filled in a way with the steam from the victims sacrificed in her

honour, and the intangibility of the stuffing didn't trouble her—it was warm, and smelt like spikenard.

As for the feelings of the victims, these did not enter into her calculations, the whole show was so absolutely impersonal to her. Any pangs she might feel for the aloofness of the two she called father and mother, she had decided some time ago to smother, and to cast out, harbouring and encouraging them never having altered or influenced the state of affairs by one finger's breadth.

She saw little of Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes in these days. The Scripture lessons had come to an end, and she had turned the whole subject into her mind's rubbish hole ; what she had learned was sufficiently interesting at the time, but it had never come any farther than to the outer edge of her life, even when it was warmed and lighted by Mr. Fellowes' love for his subject, and when the hours spent at the Rectory were the only bright flecks in the week's dinginess.

Now all these surroundings were withdrawn ; the slight mist of glamour that used to hang round the subject had floated off, and Gwen was quite ready to shoot her stored-up accumulation of facts and deductions anywhere, to make room for more serviceable stuff. Only, what we have learned, good or bad, we must keep somewhere, God help us !

She was a clever girl, however, and well-bred, and had read a good deal one way and the other, so she had the sense to hold her tongue, and to keep her embryo opinions to herself. This made her equally magnanimous as regarded the opinions of her neighbours.

“Gwen's attitude of mind makes me quite sick,” said

Mrs. Fellowes one day ; "that is, when she shows a glimpse of it, which isn't often nowadays. She hasn't had a volcanic outbreak for a century ; they are ruinous to one's clothes, but I'd bear the spoiling of my new front for one this minute."

Mr. Fellowes laughed.

"There is a twist in her somehow, and we have come to a nasty obstruction. When she is properly straightened she'll be a fine creature ; but the untwisting will be too gradual for you, my poor Ruth, you'll be worn out before it's finished."

"One would think she was a boa constrictor,—I believe she has a touch of its nature too ; she crushes hearts enough, anyway, and with just as little compunction. I am sorry for young Patrick Hamilton ; I love that boy."

"Which is no reason at all why Gwen should. The girl doesn't flirt, and he sought his crushing with open eyes. I believe it's the girl's brains as much as her beauty which dominates and reduces men's hearts."

"Very likely. The bigger fool a man is, the more he is vanquished by brain, especially if it keeps itself in the background and doesn't frighten him. He likes the agreeable sensation of importance the possible possession of such a power gives him, and in his state of nervous tension, the creature is apt to get mixed, and to imagine that the power he worships radiates somehow from him to his idol instead of contrariwise."

"A very comprehensive summary of our modes of thought, my dear, racy but untrustworthy. I don't, however, imagine that in Gwen's case any man is quite ass

enough to imagine himself the source of her intellectual strength."

"Oh, perhaps not; Gwen's getting beyond me. If she goes on like this, between brains and beauty she'll be no better than a charnel-house for crushed hearts. Pah!"

"For the shadow of the things, not the substance—do you imagine the victims haven't as firm a hold on their organs as ever they had? It's only an idea they lose half the time."

"Well, they make as much moan over it as if it were a very tangible flesh-and-blood article all bristling with nerves. I hate to look at Patrick's face; I wish he would go and shoot buffaloes, or take a tonic, or do anything but drink tea in that chair and draw sympathy out of me with those soft, foolish eyes of his! He had only just left when you came."

"I should be glad for your digestion's sake if he would recover himself,—you've swallowed three cups of tea in ten minutes."

"Yes, to wash out the memory of that boy!"

"Rather a roundabout way to go to work; if you don't look out, Pat's heart will be sound long before your digestive organs are."

"Never mind, they haven't a tinge of Americanism about them; they haven't so much as caught the accent. But how can you keep on being so hopeful of Gwen? I am downright miserable about her."

"I have the greatest trust in the girl; my feeling about her is like faith, it is inexplicable, but it's so natural, so instinctive and ingrained one feels its truth."

"I suppose in the end she will marry," said Mrs.

Fellowes; "it's the natural end or beginning of her."

"Then—well, it's not a very original observation to make, but it's the only one that comes to my mind—God help her!"

"*God help him more!* Poor wretch, he'll want it all!"

CHAPTER XV.

HUMPHREY STRANGE gave a sort of snort, made for the window, and threw it open.

"Phew! This room is beastly. I'll swear that window hasn't been open for a month, the whole place is fusty with mildew. The beggar is drunk or the wire was delayed. I'll have a fire, anyway."

By the way he went about making it, it was easy to see the man knew his work. First he shoved his stick up the chimney to see if that was free, then he looked round.

"Plenty of kindling!" he muttered, pouncing on a bandbox in the corner with a battered old hat in it. "Tolly's, I'll be bound, reeking with grease,—a direct interposition of Providence, this!"

He crushed it up, crammed it into the grate, and arranged broken pieces of bandbox above it with mathematical precision; then he rummaged a broken chair out of an inner room, smashed the rotten legs across his knees, and added them to the heap, which at the first touch of the match shot into flame.

"It will clean the air," he remarked, "and it is quite cold enough for a fire. I wish I had stayed where I was till June. Tolly's bout might have been over by that time. Not so much as the smell of an oil rag here," he continued reflecting; "I must go out and forage."

Putting another chunk of chair on the fire, and forcing a side window open with an ease that spoke well for his condition, he went out, and returned shortly with a big knobbly parcel in one hand, and a smooth brown-paper one in the other.

From the first he produced a huge wedge of steak, some cut slices of ham, and a loaf of bread—the brown held a bottle of beer.

When the fire had burnt down to a hot bed of cinders, Strange put the tongs across it, the poker and a piece of thick wire he had poked out of a cupboard across these, then balanced the steak on the top of this gridiron, and watched it fizzling and sputtering with a gratified air of expectancy.

"I left a gridiron, a saucepan, and a kettle in the bottom of that cupboard," he mused, keeping a keen eye on the grill, "all in decent condition. Tolly again! I'll put the fear of God in the fellow's heart before to-morrow's out—'That must be to-morrow, not to-night.' A sell for me, my boy, if not for you. I feel just up to it now; by to-morrow the desire may have lost its savour. I must find something to put this steak on and to hold the beer. Not a sign of my pewter! and one cracked glass! Lord! there were dozens! and one hot-water plate with half the delft off it! I could swear I left that shelf full of crockery! and after this a Christian man is expected to do no murder!"

When he had got half through the slab of steak a strong thirst came on Strange.

"There is a corkscrew in one of my inner pockets," he reflected, looking lazily round; "never mind, this is shorter!"

He stretched out his arm for the poker, and with it

knocked the top of the bottle clean off, and drank his beer with wholesome satisfaction.

When he had eaten and drunk enough, he pushed back his plate and glass, and took a bundle of quills and some MS. paper out of a small cabinet.

"Seemingly Tolly has found no use for these," he thought, as he sharpened a quill.

He then produced a bundle of smudgy notes from an inner pocket and laid them by the paper.

"I'll have a thorough good smoke," he said, stretching his legs, "and then I'll be game for six hours' work. I swear," he continued, rubbing his hideous, inch-long, bristly, reddish beard, "I'll not touch an individual bristle of this mat till Lynton has got his first consignment of 'copy,' then I shall clean up and resume civilisation."

Strange was a good many things, but he was above all others a traveller; he had neither nerves nor stomach, which is proof sufficient that he had been pre-ordained to the *rôle*, and he had discovered his election very early in life.

At the opening of one of his Eton vacations, when to look at he was a mere chit of a child, with a pair of grey eyes that were staggering from the sheer artlessness of them, he had dodged the parental eye at Waterloo, and instead of going down into Plowshire, he had taken ship at Rotherhithe, and had reached Amsterdam by the skin of his teeth, the tub being untrustworthy, and nearly foundering in mid-channel.

When he came back, more artless than ever to look at, he knew as much of the life of the Hollanders of all classes, and of every side of the life, moreover, as if he had dwelt among them for a round five years.

On his return to school he proceeded to record his experiences in the school organ, and on their appearance in that chaste journal he was had up before his house master.

"Where did you hear all this, Strange?" demanded the scandalised gentleman.

"I saw it, sir, and it's quite true," was the artless reply.

"The deuce it is!" muttered Dr. Bromby. "That hardly betters matters. I have ordered every copy of this paper to be burnt, Strange," said the Doctor, severely; "and in future I wish to look through your manuscript myself before it goes to the press. Unalloyed truth is sometimes out of place. Stick to your classics, Strange; you will write well some day, that is, if you become a little surer in your Latin, otherwise your English will always be slovenly. If I were you I should reserve some of my experiences, if you are in the habit of entertaining your fags with them in off-times," concluded the Doctor.

"Yes, sir," said Humphrey, and departed cheerily.

Strange had just now come back unexpectedly from a long tour in Algeria. According to his own way of thinking he had had a glorious time if ever man had. He had lived in the tents of the Arabs, in the camps of the coast Zouaves, and in the hills and the deserts with the Bedouins. Like David, he had known

"Of the plunge in a pool's living water,
the hunt of the bear,
And the sultriness showing the lion
is couched in his lair,
And the meal, the rich dates yellowed
over with gold-dust divine,

And the locust flesh steeped in the pitcher,
the full draught of wine."

He had braved heat, cold, hunger, thirst, filth and squalor, fleas and worse than fleas, snakes and beasts of prey, but he had learned a new variety of man and of the conditions which mould men's lives.

He had lived the life himself, and could think as such men think, feel as they feel, speak and act as they do. He had gained a new power and felt a new growth of manhood quickening in his veins, and now he was recording what he knew.

Many travellers only *see*, he *knew*. He had touched the core of the heart of things, and every word he wrote carried conviction to those who read, and marvelled at the wonderful knack the fellow had of telling primitive truths cleanly.

Strange kept his word and worked without break for six hours on end, then he tumbled off his seat with sudden sleep, having just sense enough to first roll himself in his ulster. When Tolly arrived next morning at eleven o'clock, the delayed wire in his hand, and his hair erect with terror, he found his master snoring in a strong breeze, with the full sun on him, and at least a pound of dried grease all over the fender. Tolly groaned.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOLLY proceeded in a vague sort of scurry to clear up. But in general confusion of conscience and in his gin-begotten shakiness, he presently dropped the poker with a clatter, and Strange awoke and sat bolt upright in his ulster.

"Well, Tolly, how do you feel?" he demanded blandly, regarding the forlorn, dirty figure with a persistent and contemplative stare that caused it to wriggle and writhe like a worm.

Tolly was a very long, thin, crooked person, whether young or old it was impossible to decide, unless you happened to have seen his baptismal register.

His mother herself was rather at sea on the question. "He has always looked like that from a baby," she remarked to the school inspector, when he called one day to round up the urchin, who from his lanky length certainly looked quite meet for Primers. "I don't believe myself he's that old, but he may be, there ain't no tellin'; he's that queer, one can't never say nothin' certain regardin' him."

Tolly's freckles were his great point, they were so many, so parti-coloured and so varied in form; they congregated most on his long, thin nose, and tumbled over one another in a way that gave the appendage

a scaly look like the tail of a fish. Tolly's teeth suffered from early decay; he may have had a few back-grinders, but all he could boast of in front was one abnormally long fang at the right side, that wobbled frightfully at every word, and when he was nervous from gin, wobbled even when he was silent.

"If I remember aright," continued Strange, "you took the pledge the night before I left; you cried too—let alone roared—with remorse."

"Yes, sir, I don't deny nothin'."

"I'd like to catch you at it! Well, how long did you keep the pledge?"

"I believe it were a matter of three weeks, sir; then I cotched cold."

"Oh, indeed! And the gin cotched you? Now, clear up that place. I shall cook breakfast myself. When you have put things ship-shape—from my point of view, not yours, recollect—I shall give you sixpence; then you can go to the baths round the corner, and scrub yourself from head to foot. Your things—except the hat, I burnt that; you appear to have stored dripping in it—are in the box I gave you; put them on and then wait here for me. That gridiron, those tumblers, those cups and other things you have smashed or pawned, you will buy out of your next three weeks' wages—Farris's gin-hole has all your savings, no doubt. And to-night I shall give you a dose of castor oil mixed with senna."

"Oh, Lord help me!" groaned Tolly, and he shuffled nearer to his master, with his slits of lips drawn tight across his fang—he had experienced Strange's treatment before this.

"Now stop groaning, and do your work; neither I

nor the Lord would touch you with a pair of tongs in your present condition. You have earned your punishment, and of course you shall get it. If you lived decently you would have a first-rate place, and you know it; and look here, I have come to the end of my patience; if I find you in this state again I shall sack you."

Tolly gave an anguished squeal.

"Oh, I'll try, sir; I does try, I swear to God I does. I tries, I does, till I sweats like a bullock, and doesn't know if I'm on my head or my heels, but summow it ain't no go. Don't sack me, for the love of God, don't, sir."

"Finish your sweeping, and go over that place under the table again. I shall see how you get on after the bath and the castor oil.

"Poor beggar!" said Strange to himself, as he ate his ham and drank his well-sweetened tea. "Poor beggar! I wonder if I shall ever make anything out of him! Only that the creature is so weakly—look at the miserable hold of his claws on that dustpan!—I should take him about with me; the Arabs would teach him sobriety anyway, and he might pose as an apostle of Christianity among them."

At this thought Strange chuckled aloud, and helped himself to another slice of ham.

Tolly's face brightened as he heard the sound; he turned furtively to watch his earthly Providence, and went on with his dusting with redoubled fury.

"Now," said Strange, when he had finished, "carry all these things into the next room and have a good feed. When did you happen to have your last meal?"

On the point of truth Strange was inexorable; the

fellow dared not lie ; but he had a sort of bastard pride about him, and felt the question keenly. Turning a sickly puce, he stammered,—

“ I haven’t had nothing yesterday, sir ; summow I didn’t feel like it.”

“ No ? Well, if I were you I’d cultivate the feeling now. Send in the barber on your way to the bath, and hand down that ink bottle from the shelf before you go. Pah ! you can’t even fill an ink bottle, your hand shakes so ! Upon my word, if I have to sack you I don’t know what you’ll do, you aren’t worth fourpence a week in this condition.”

Tolly gave a dumb shudder, and his fang kept time to it.

Five years before, Strange had picked him up out of a sewer, where he went to learn the trade of ratting. Strange liked to learn the ins and outs of anything that had any suggestion of human interest in it.

He had brought the half-dead, mouldy creature to his rooms ; and after saving his life, it struck him to keep it, and see what could be done with it. This was the result.

As long as Strange was at home Tolly kept straight, but directly he was out of reach, the miserable, absorbing craving took hold of the wretch, and pinched, and pulled, and nipped, as with raging hot irons, at the very soul of him, till at last he swallowed his humanity at a gulp, gave way to the beast, and fled to the gin-shop. He had endured the torture this last time for three weeks.

Strange thought, with grim pity, as he watched him through the heavy Eastern curtains, devouring his food to the dropping of tears, “ Poor beggar !

I shall never be able to get rid of him as long as life holds whatever morsel of soul he may have in him. Meanwhile, I cannot stand that solitary fang; when he has got over his brew I shall get him a set of teeth."

He lay back and laughed. "They'll be the ruin of his immortal soul, those teeth. Fancy the grin of the fellow when his lips have a resisting surface to stretch across! Brown will charge frightfully for filling such a cavern."

He laughed again and turned to his work; and in two hours he had the first batch of "copy" ready for the printer. Then he yawned and stretched, and apologised to the barber, whom he had kept waiting an hour and ten minutes.

When he was shaved, he dressed, and set forth to resume civilisation.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN he got outside his rooms, which were in a turning off Piccadilly, Strange looked up and down the street and at his watch.

"I shall not bother with luncheon; that ham will last till eight," he said. "I shall go to the Club, and I suppose I must see Aunt Moll. I'll go there to tea, she'll be up probably, and perhaps awake by that time."

He struck out for his Club, and made a rapid tour of the premises; but he found there was no good to be got there, the billiard-rooms were empty, and the reading-rooms were given over to half a dozen old fellows suffering from gout and senile decay.

"It's too early and too late for anything," he muttered, as he lighted a fresh cigar on the steps; "it will be a full week, besides, before I get into the swing again. I shall try Brydon."

With that he swung off down the street, past some big thoroughfares, then he cut across a mesh of alleys and courts, out into some dingy squares, landing at last in Bloomsbury Square. He walked round till he got to a tall, narrow house in a corner, where he pulled up, pushed open the door, which was ajar, and went upstairs to the fifth story, where he found a door with

"Mr. Brydon" painted on it in big letters. He opened it, and walked in.

A big, fair boy with a cigarette in his mouth was sitting before an easel, touching up a background; he spoke in a soft, tired voice, without turning an inch of himself.

"Excuse me, Carry, I can't possibly stand up, I am wrestling with a curtain. Kindly sit down and begin your apologies. Is Ma's 'neuralgy' bad, or the baby? Is it 'it'? I am not quite certain as to the sex of the last. By the way, don't they come with undue speed, those babies, or do you spread all the diseases out on one?—Or did Pa go for you, and render your nose unfit for immortality? Two hours behind time to-day; that's nothing to you in the day's work, no doubt, but I may remark that it's slightly inconvenient to me, as I prefer daylight to dark to catch the super-excellent tones of your skin."

"I should have thought, on the whole, that the glow——"

"Strange!" he cried, with a soft, slow gurgle of intense delight, and lifting himself clumsily up from his seat, he caught Strange's hand in a close clasp, and pushed him back into an old frilled arm-chair.

"I thought you were in Algeria. It was a dangerous experiment, old fellow; the betting was ten to one that I was painting off a model, and I am continually overlooking that lock. You're only just back, I see. What a glorious, dusty, smooth red you've got on your cheeks! For goodness' sake let me have it before gas and sich play the deuce with it."

"Take it, my child, take it. What a pity you didn't have the beard too! That was a far more glorious

red, and a sight dustier, but I parted with it this morning !”

“Thank you ; I’ve seen your bristles once ; I never wish to behold them again. Now smoke, and I’ll just have a shy at catching that tint ; it’s precisely what I want for this beggar’s cheek. My model had it to perfection ; but they clapped him into quad for prigging saveloys, and when he comes out he will be useless—the colour of bad paste.”

“Your room’s hardly serious enough ; it’s pretty, in a doll’s-house style.”

“Serious ! I can’t afford that. One can’t extract seriousness from rags ; but the colours are good and the cost small. Look at the drapery hiding the crack in the wall in that corner—fourpence-halfpenny the yard, and a reduction by the piece !”

“And you probably went dinnerless for that !” thought Strange, watching the tall, heavy-looking fellow, with his straight, limp brown hair hanging over his forehead in a way that gave him a queer, foolish look ; an effect that his big, alive eyes were constantly contradicting.

The soft, sleepy tones of his voice, which, only that they happened to be peculiarly clear, would never have been heard at all, added rather to this effect. Strange, however, was quite aware that the eyes of the fellow spoke the truth, and that the hair and the soft speech lied.

His father had been curate in the parish where Strange’s father was the squire ; and even then the big boy had been good to the little one, and the unequal friendship was still kept up between the two. It was a pleasant little corner in the life of the older man ; it

was the best part of life to the boy ; and no one had a notion of the intense love and gratitude he bore to the big, notable man who took the trouble to know him.

Strange had stood by him in the bad crisis of his life, when things had come to a head, and his father, the curate, had put down his foot and damned art permanently, and the boy, for his part, had comprehensively damned the Church, and had then stepped out of the parental porch with a five-pound note in his pocket, and in his eyes the yearning greed for colour.

"How are you getting on?" said Strange.

"Oh, I live, and I hardly owe a thing,—which is a consolation, in case I happened to die off in a hurry, and had to be beholden to the governor to fork up. I have no feelings at all about the funeral expenses or the shroud ; I shall make no provision for these—they seem in his line, somehow. But it would cut the old man up frightfully if he had to pay the models or the beer, or anything smacking of the devil, you know.—Would you mind turning your face an inch to the right?"

"What are you at? Haven't you got the brick-dust yet?"

"Yes—in a way ; but I want to sketch you," said Brydon, measuring him with his pencil. "I won't be long ; you look so cool, and big, and 'kinder' dogged, you've given me a notion. You've grown frightfully since you went away, especially about the eyes ; they've got so confoundedly deep and intricate. Why don't you have eyes like decent God-fearing mortals?"

"Ask my parents. If they refuse you the information, I can only refer you to my godfather and godmother. By the way, what's wrong with you, Charlie?"

"Me!—Nothing!—I had another bout of rheumatic fever a month ago, and I have felt a trifle stodgy since at times, especially after a grind up these stairs."

"Heart!" thought Strange. "Poor beggar! it'll be hard on him if he's carried off before he learns to draw. Will you dine with me to-day?"

Brydon's face lit; he had ecstatic memories of dinners with Strange, and, as a matter of fact, his dinners for two days past had consisted of bread—and mustard to give it a relish.

"Thank you, old man, I can't—I can't go anywhere till Friday."

"Why, in Heaven's name?"

"I have some black and white to do," he said, mixing some paint hurriedly.

Strange took a glance at his back view and shrugged his shoulders.

"The beggar's sure to let it out; he always does," he reflected.

After a few minutes' silent painting Brydon turned round.

"I generally tell you most things," he said, "if you wait long enough, and you know by this time what an abject ass I am, so you may as well hear the climax.

"I was down sketching in Surrey last month. I went after the fever—I didn't feel as if I could stand the stairs just then—and I found a girl in a cottage there, who was willing to sit for me whenever I wanted her. She was—divine! Look!" he got up slowly and took a little canvas from behind the door. "Look! Did Greuse ever have such a head to paint from? I fell in love with her. Of course, it was that colour that did it;—that, and her poses, and all her little ways

and movements, and her soft little voice—oh—oh—you know the sort of fool I am ! I lodged at her mother's house, and the pair nursed me as if I were a sick cat. Well—I had to leave that place at a moment's notice, or I don't know what might have happened—you know. I paid up and cleared.

“Would you believe it, I hadn't been home a week, when who should appear one night, past ten o'clock, but that girl ? Upon my word, I broke out in a cold sweat all over. I'm as weak as water, and—she was divine. I tell you—I had an awful job altogether. I quieted her down first, then I had to bathe her feet, such pretty pink little ones, but all torn and bruised. If you believe me, she had walked from some miles this side of Godalming. I got her some food, and gave her up my bed, and, somehow or other, I got her back next day ; she'd have stayed on any terms, poor little soul ! Girls are queer fish,” he said modestly, “one never can tell what'll fetch them. It was all pretty hot on the mother, however, so I gave her the few shillings I had ; and then she wrote to say that the girl got fever from the walk, so of course I've had to help them, and I regret to say my boots have gone for a change to mine uncle's. I shall be paid on Friday, and then I'll bloom back into my pristine glory and accept invitations.

“I wonder,” he went on reflectively, “if there's any way of keeping a fellow from making a fool of himself. If you have happened to hear of any in your travels, an anti-love philtre now, for Heaven's sake divulge it ; it ruins one's work getting in love in a promiscuous way ; it's a nuisance too, and devilish expensive. I know I always have to pay compound interest for my pleasures in this line, and they're absolutely mawkish

too, in their innocence," he added, with a little injured sigh.

Strange watched the boy curiously, wondering what possible motive, or train of motives, combined to keep his life so clean, with its every condition on the side of uncleanness.

"He has neither convictions nor religion to hold him; he is as passionate and sensual a fellow as any going; he is steeped to the lips in Zola and others of that ilk; theoretically, innocence and he are as far apart as the poles. He is a fool, no doubt, but I wish to God the folly would last."

Brydon guessed the elder man's thoughts, or perhaps his own were running on the same lines, as he sketched in the strong, steady, cool face, with a breadth of technique that was marvellous in a boy of his age and opportunities.

"I wonder myself," he said, "I don't make more of my pleasures. A fellow has opportunities somehow," he added, with pleasing diffidence, "no matter how poor he is; but I have a sort of notion I might lose in Art what I should gain in pleasure. It would be idiotic to run that risk, wouldn't it? I have a sort of theory—it's probably rot, though it has a sound of truth about it—that the cleaner one keeps one's body and soul, the clearer one's eyes keep, and the better able to tackle the truth in Nature."

He paused, a little embarrassed. Any expression, even of the most primitive morality, brings a blush of shame to the cheek of youth.

"That sounds like a workable theory," assented Strange; "and, upon my word, I believe you will find it so. The opposite is playing the deuce with the

modern Italian school, and it strikes one like a blow in a lot of the work of the youngsters there. I would thresh out that theory if I were you, nothing half and half will do."

"No," said Brydon ruefully ; "no, that is where the grind comes in."

Strange laughed, the fellow's face and accent fitted his speech so comically.

"I suppose I must let him get over the boot business himself, he's so unpleasantly cocky ; but I'm convinced he's hungry. I wonder how much the jade got out of him ! Charlie," he then said aloud, "I must be off ; I shall expect you on Friday at my Club. If I were you, old chap, I should stop that young person's supplies, the fever must be off her by this time."

"I have a sort of awful conviction that it's going to be intermittent, and that nothing but a change of address will have any effect upon it. But, oh, old man, if you could have seen that girl," he concluded, regarding her head mournfully, with his own on one side, and with an overwhelming longing for the Egyptian flesh-pots surging up within him.

Strange slapped him on the shoulder. "Just as well not ; fevers come expensive, whether they take you or the victim to your charms. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"To look at the fellow one would never give him credit for half the grit he has," thought Strange, as he glanced round for a cab at the street corner. "If I had money I should send him to Paris," he went on as soon as he had settled himself comfortably; "the Kensington methods are no manner of use to him. It's the deuce of a shame, too, that he has to attempt finished work for a living when he should be swatting over the beginning. And that colour mania—that will get chronic and overgrow him, and then God help him!"

As it happened, Lady Mary was at home and quite wide-awake. As a rule, this was not the case until much later in the day; but just now various things combined to keep her sensitised.

When Strange was announced, she was sitting well screened from the small, bright fire, gazing in soft meditation at her plump, white hands, with the corners of her mouth slightly drawn downwards, and her smooth, round forehead wrinkled up in a way that would have gone to the heart of a stone to see in such a picture of comfort as she was made to be.

"Humphrey!" she exclaimed, making a vain try at a spring and flopping down again limply, "Humphrey!"

"Myself and no other," said Strange, receiving her kiss cheerfully, and settling himself into a chair after he had shaken it to see if it would bear. "I needn't ask you how you are, Aunt Moll, you look just as you have always done—like a catkin."

"A what, Humphrey?" she enquired anxiously.

"A catkin: we used to call them goslings—soft, oval, pale gold, silky, fluffy masses—you have a weakness for adjectives I know, judging from the line in literature you patronise. The harshest wind has never been known to ruffle a gosling; it always skips them; they always feel warm to the touch, as if the sun were on them; they are delicious things. The sun is always on you, Aunt Moll, isn't it?"

"Ah, Humphrey, you little know; you can make but a faint guess at my troubles. The death of my dear——"

"Aunt Moll, we'll skip that!" interrupted Strange, with a twinkle.

He knew quite well what an unmixed relief the deceased peer's removal was to all his kith and kin, more especially to his wife.

"If you recollect, before I went to Algiers we agreed to let my uncle rest, undisturbed, in his present retreat, which, from what we know of his past, must be unexceptionable. Whatever his faults may have been, no one can deny that he was a most exclusive person, and had a very just notion of his position."

"Dear Humphrey! this flippancy! I had hoped that the many dangers you have experienced, the many times you have come face to face with death—and, Humphrey, with *Eternity*—would have brought the seriousness of life before your eyes."

"Aunt Moll, the sight of you there in that chair brings that view of the case more clearly before me than ever the sight of death did."

Lady Mary again looked anxious; her nephew always made her feel like that; his eyes seemed to rake her from stem to stern, and to find some mute amusement in the process. Suddenly she gave a little start.

"What have I been thinking of?" she murmured. "Humphrey," she began again, "we must speak of your prospects."

She was bubbling over with them as it happened; besides, they would keep him off her.

"What are you thinking of doing now?"

"What I have always been thinking of doing, and have never done yet,—making the result of my face to face encounters with death—and *Eternity*—of some practical value to the world in general, and to myself in particular, by filling my trousers' pockets, which at this present moment contain one pound six and three-pence, and that's mostly due for beer."

"Humphrey! Have you heard nothing? Your letters?"

"I never read them. For Heaven's sake, speak, divulge,—I'm ready for anything!"

"Your great-uncle is dead—died last month. Before he went he confessed a heavy sin that had lain for years on his soul, poor dear creature. That great, lanky son of his,—about whom, as you know, I always had a nasty feeling, as if he were not altogether quite right, as if somehow he was not one of us: this now proves to have been a quite prophetic instinct,—he turns out to be—ahem—illegitimate, and you, you, Humphrey, are the heir."

"I say ! It's awfully hard lines on Tom !"

Strange was quite as staggered with the news as any other younger son in his condition would have been. It vibrated through and through him ; but as one cannot clothe thunder in harmonies, any more than one can a tumultuous muddle of sensations in speech, in the presence of a woman chiefly gush and stoutness, he swallowed his muddle and was flippant.

"Humphrey !" said Lady Mary with dignity, wondering a little if Humphrey himself were quite right, "this minute you have ten thousand a year, and you, my nephew, are Sir Humphrey Strange."

"Am I ? You'll be astonished to hear I don't feel a bit like it ; I feel exactly as I did before. Is there any difference to the naked eye ? If so, do you mind telling me ?" .

Lady Mary stirred uneasily and crossed her hands.

"Dear Humphrey !" she cried at last, with a soft, wailing bleat, "I confess I did expect some show of proper feeling from you on this occasion. It is a shock to me to see you in your present frame of mind ; it seems like flying in the face of Providence, and may end in bringing down a judgment on your head."

Lady Mary sighed, and continued, lowering her voice to a coo, "When I heard the news, Humphrey, I went down on my knees, and prayed that my poor, sinful uncle might be forgiven for foisting that counterfeit young man off on our family, and that you, my nephew, might face your responsibilities with a seriousness befitting the occasion. My dear, if you knew what it costs me to kneel, now that I have grown a little stout, you might perhaps appreciate this act."

Humphrey grinned.

"Aunt Moll, my feelings are always too deep for expression; it would upset you for a month if I were to give you the merest glimpse of the emotions that are ravaging me this minute. These inward upheavals are frightfully wasting; your acts of prayer and thanksgiving are a fool to them. There doesn't happen to be any tea going, does there?"

"Tea! Is it five o'clock? What can have happened? Pray ring. The misery I have to endure with servants! I wonder my hair isn't even greyer than it is, and my poor face more worn."

"Your hair is as brown as a nut, and there isn't a crease in your dear, soft young face. What was wrong with you when I came in?—the corners of your mouth were turned the wrong way."

Lady Mary reflected as she made his tea.

"Ah, it was Gwen; she has thrown aside another most desirable match, the third in three months."

"Gwen,—what?"

"Gwen Waring: she is with me for the season."

"Ah, that queer, sulky, imperturbable, long-legged girl, belonging to those wonderful young fossils at Waring Park. I shouldn't have thought she'd have got the chance to throw over any match, let alone three *desirable* ones——"

"Humphrey!"

"What's up? Gru!——"

He sprang to his feet.

A tall, superb girl, with a face like a hothouse flower, was standing in the middle of the room, looking at him with a cool aloofness that made his blood run cold. She had heard every word—she must have, his voice was a big one.

This magnificent, dominant creature, before whom he felt as a worm, was only an enlarged, completed edition of the "sulky, long-legged" slip, of whom he used to catch fitful glances in his stays with his aunt.

If only he hadn't classified her in such cool, pleasant tones! It was not often "a fellow felt at such a disadvantage. If the girl had made a joke now, or even looked as if she could make one!" But she knew better than to joke; she had her tactics ready to her hand, and she was determined his impertinence should be brought home to him.

Her own classification never troubled her in the least; it was the good-humoured sneer at her parents which touched her. Was she always to suffer for being the product of such a house?

The next few minutes Strange felt younger than he had done for ten years.

"Lady Mary has been telling me of your good fortune," she remarked kindly, sipping her tea, and looking at him in as motherly a way as so very splendid a person could look. "You must be quite excited—I suppose you are already making a hundred plans?

"I seem to know you quite well," she went on, not giving him the chance to reply; "Lady Mary is always telling anecdotes of 'her boy,'—very entertaining ones they are too, and I should fancy characteristic."

She helped herself to more cream, and regarded him coolly.

"When she reads prayers she always makes a special and very full mention of you."

Lady Mary winced abjectly, and looked deprecatingly at her nephew, but his eyes were fastened on Gwen. His aunt felt she had escaped for once. She settled

herself into her pillows, and wondered vaguely what would happen next.

She had a horrid feeling that there were breakers ahead somewhere; but as she never by any chance could see farther than her own nose, she decided not to make any effort at sighting them, but to drift on with faith.

"Very considerate of my aunt!" said Strange, in a pause.

"Oh, that is only one instance of her consideration, and the least important. She has done much more than that for you; she is like John the Baptist without the skins and locusts; she has 'been preparing the way before you,' and you have only to appear to be mobbed, Sir Humphrey. There's not a matron nor a maid in London who doesn't babble of you; your name is rippling off a hundred tongues at this very minute; you are the hero of a hundred teas. All this came on after a long round of calls Lady Mary and I paid last Monday," she continued, scanning him. "I had only heard your name before, in the outward world, that is, in a queer aside way, as if one hinted at dark things that had better not be unearthed—the Baronetcy of course never affected Lady Mary's prayers and anecdotes; they were always with us. Ah, but that is all changed! You have no notion, though, how exhausting the process has been to Lady Mary."

She stopped at last.

"No," he said, looking at his aunt, "I certainly hadn't perceived any symptoms of a cave-in about her. Monday, did you say, Miss Waring? Would you mind letting me have your visiting list for that day, Aunt Moll? I suppose I know some of the people,

and my soul's one desire for years has been to pose as a tea-hero. I shall just have time to get a foretaste of the joys this afternoon. Good-bye, Aunt Moll; pray don't look anxious on my account; my morals are tough enough to run the gauntlet of all the teas in London, and my digestion is unimpaired. Good-bye, Miss Waring," he said, bowing gravely in her direction; "thank you for standing by my aunt on Monday's warpath; I am gratified to see *you* are in no sort of way exhausted by the process.—Hang it all!" he muttered, as he got out into the street, "she smells of a hothouse, with her overpowering beauty, and her insolent airs, and that cool, inexorable way of hers. Oh, Aunt Moll, you'll rue the day you made me a by-word. To think I had to swallow all that, and let a girl bait me!"

He laughed aloud.

"And so I am the coming *parti*! Good Lord! I'll be fine practice for the 'sport,'—anyway they'll find me shy game. I'll go home, finish a chapter or two, dose Tolly, and then I'll dine.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed suddenly, "things are looking up for Charlie; he can go to Paris now when he likes. I wonder how I can reduce his high stomach to seeing it in that light!"

CHAPTER XIX.

STRANGE found the preliminaries of his induction into the *rôle* of an English squire even more unpleasant than he had expected.

During the period when he had read Roman law, and knocked about the Courts with the hope of supplementing his income by the experience he picked up there, the technicalities of the law had bored him to excruciation point. Now, when they were brought specially to bear on him, he found them more galling still; but being a wise man in his way, he shirked none of them, and took good care not to take a solitary step in the dark, till, by the time they had got him off their hands, the solicitors of the Stranges were in a position to congratulate themselves at last on the fact of having found a whole man in the family.

He had gone the rounds of his duties doggedly, and had found them insufferably dull; he had been down to Strange Hall, had left things there in trim, and had now flown back to London.

One afternoon in June he was standing in the shadow of a deep window, in one of his rooms in Piccadilly, lazily sharpening a pencil.

He had plenty of work to do, but somehow he had no stomach for it; the change in his life had got into his bones, and had filled him with unrest and a certain

loss of faith in himself. When at last, after a long meditation, the truth of this broke upon him, it came with an audible and ample "Damn!"

"I may as well give it up and amuse myself in a mild way," he thought, after a hasty review of matters; "nothing can be too weak and vapid for my present condition—I feel flabby."

A mild grunt at his back made him swing round. It was Tolly, just back from the dentist, of a deeper puce than usual, and with a terrible, uncompromising row of glistening teeth shooting out aggressively between his thin lips.

He gave a deferential duck, and stood on approval, with a laboured attempt at an appearance of modest deprecation.

"Turn round, Tolly," said his master, "away from me. I can't bear them all at once!"

He was shaking with silent laughter.

"How do you feel about them yourself, Tolly?"

"Fust-rate, sir—your wussup."

Since his master's rise in life he was much exercised as to the best terms by which to give him honour, and he varied them daily.

"I can bite nails, your wussup."

"Ah! You mustn't play fast and loose with these tusks, as you might with ones bred and reared on the premises."

"Lord, your wussup! I wouldn't make that free, being as they are your property, sir; besides, any fool can see as how they be the real bought article, money down—not your everyday, common grinders. There weren't a toff I met as didn't mention 'em. I tried to keep 'em dark, sir."

"I shall expect a good deal more from you," said Strange, pointing the moral, "now you're complete. If any one calls to-day, say I'm out, and I won't be home till night; and take these to the post before I start," he pointed to a big heap of notes on the table, "and don't drop any of them—or swallow your teeth."

"Twenty invitations in a week," reflected Tolly's master; "the first-fruits of my rise in life! they used to average six a week. I'll go and see Lady Mary. Damn it all! why need a man lie to himself? I'll go and see Miss Waring!"

And he went; and somehow the next day he went again, and the next, and the next after that. Then he and Gwen discovered a mutual passion for riding; not up and down the Row—that seemed as tame a pastime to the one as to the other—but in the early mornings, out on the heath at Hampstead, or sometimes far out on the Surrey side.

Once they went as far as Surbiton, where they got drenched in a shower—and had to take refuge and have tea in an old inn.

But it is not at all to be supposed that with all this intimacy those two got an inch nearer one another; they were intellectual companions—nothing more; not even to be called comrades.

Gwen neither evaded nor shirked conventions; she simply swept them aside, as she did her lovers. As for Strange, he felt her and the rides very distinctly a boon. She was an excellent flint to make sparks with; her ways of thought were so new, let alone startling; her modes of expression so quaint, her tongue so remarkably sharp, and she had such a brutal habit of speaking undiluted truths. For the once the

two agreed, they disagreed at least three times, and a good pitched battle had to be fought to settle any question. The sponge was never by any chance thrown up, it was forced out of the hand of one or of the other of them. It was a most bracing and delightful experience for Gwen; it was so satisfactory, and so absolutely free from mawkishness, and she reflected, with superb self-congratulation, that the man had just as little capacity for that phase as herself.

"She's hard—hard as nails," he reflected, after an evening at Lady Mary's; "and yet, she wasn't made like that, I could swear. I wonder what the devil's wrong with her eyes, and what'll put them right? There's not a man living that would have any effect upon them, and yet there are fellows going who would take that dewiness for softness. Hang it! it's mere moisture; but—ah, well, the effect is magnificent!"

He took out his watch, but his hand shook so that he could not open it.

"God forgive me!" he muttered, "this is awful! I have had a good deal in the way of education at women's hands, but this is a new experience," he remarked after a pause, grinning, and flicking a spot of ash off his coat. "Her want of self-consciousness is next to ghastly; it has an uncanny, sexless sort of air about it that gives one the shivers."

The intellectual companionship continued unabated for ten more days; then, one evening at the end of June, Gwen Waring told Strange that she and Lady Mary were going down into the country early in July.

When he got home that night he had a difficulty in mounting the stairs. When he succeeded, he got himself to the glass, and found he was white to the

lips. He had had a shock—he had discovered, as he had turned out of Lady Mary's softly-lighted hall into the street, that he loved the girl irretrievably ; and with the knowledge came fear.

For a few minutes he leaned against the mantelpiece, his head sunk into his hands ; then he raised himself with a sigh, threw off his light overcoat, and sat down to smoke ; but he couldn't draw a puff ; then it struck him that he was numb with cold.

He looked at the grate with a purpose to make a fire lighting in his eyes, but with a shrug he shirked the trouble. He could not go to bed, that was out of the question ; as for sitting there freezing, that was just as impossible. He must move ; he must feel the life stir in him again. He stood up and shook himself ; then a thought struck him ; he hurried to his room, changed his clothes, and went out round the corner to the mews where he kept the horses he had brought up from Strange Hall.

He found the gear, saddled the freshest, and rode away through short cuts and byways, away from the noise and hurly-burly, out into the quiet of the country. Then he drew rein, pulled the mare aside on to a green strip flanking the road, and let her go her own pace. For a long time he gave her grace, and smoked savagely.

"It is about the most killing blow that could have fallen on a man. It would be bad for any fellow ; but for me, who can love if I can do anything, to have to pour it all out at the feet of a girl who couldn't understand what love, much less passion, means, to save her life ! It's a nasty backhanded stroke of fate, and I don't know that I've ever done anything bad enough

to deserve it. Lord, how the mare's sides smoke! I must have ridden like a maniac. The worst of it is, this isn't a thing one can clear off and forget with the eternal face of her in one's soul!—the fine, grand, proud creature! It's almost sacrilege to expect her to love, with love in the state it is—to love any man—Jack of us; it's honour enough to love her, and yet,—yet,—when a man has once done it, done it once and for ever, the only thing in life seems to be to get something in return. What commercial brutes we are even in this holiest connection of all! But let her love or not, I'll give her my love if she'll take it, and I shall pick up crumbs like Lazarus.—Phew! how she dominates one!—And when *her* love wakes up—but, the devil! suppose another fellow is the instrument chosen! Ah!—ah! hold up, mare, are you stumbling or am I reeling? It's myself, by Jove. God help us!”

Involuntarily he drove his spurs into the beast; she started forward angrily, unused to maniacs. Presently he came to his senses, and pulled her up with a drag on her mouth that she did not forget for some time. She went sulky and stumbled for the next mile, small blame to her! A Christian would have done more.

Gradually her master's face cleared itself and softened.

“Perhaps,” he muttered, “perhaps it may come right after all. There's no knowing how much of the perfect woman lies hidden beneath the shell of such girlhood.”

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN Strange got back to town, after baiting man and beast at a little inn on the outskirts of Weybridge, Tolly's greeting, which was blasphemous and amazed, and the unusual look in his green eyes, caused his master to glance at himself in the glass.

"Well!" he thought, turning away, "I'm a nice object to go courting! One would think I had just emerged from D.T., or Bedlam! Tolly, turn on the hot water, empty a bottle of vinegar into it, and put out clean clothes for me. I feel like jelly. Good Lord! has love this limping effect often?"

He turned into his bedroom. As he was wrestling with one of his shirt buttons he muttered,—

"However this goes, it's a toss-up what the gain will be, heaven or hell. Well, a man might do worse than face hell for her,—or better still *with* her."

He had hardly made this heroic remark when the absurdity of it struck him; he laughed aloud. "I had better face my bath," he said.

When he was washed and dressed, he rather thought of the Club and a good lunch, but the game didn't seem worth the candle. He felt that his hands were quite sufficiently full with one woman, he had no desire for men, more especially at feeding-time.

"I shall have my lunch here," he said, looking up from his paper ; "get out some bread and cheese, and beer, and anything else you can lay your hands on."

In five minutes Tolly had covered a little round table with a cloth, and had set out on it a mixed assortment of cheese, beer, jam, and a freshly-opened tin of *foie gras*, and he stood proudly in attendance with napkin on arm, keeping down with difficulty a grin of self-satisfaction.

However full he was of himself, Strange never let a new accomplishment of Tolly's escape him ; if he had done so the effect on the boy would have been disastrous. No sinner ever strove after God as this sinner after his owner.

"Well done, Tolly, you'll shine in life yet ; the way you flourish that damask is sublime !"

"Beggin' your pardon, your wussup," said Tolly, "Bill, the groom, 'e were round after ye, a-stormin' at me because the horse was out. Bill always lets out at me like when he feels hisself put about in his mind, and he thought you and the beast were lost," sniggered Tolly. "I told him you was big enough to take care of yourself, and that gents often finds the nights more convenient than the days," he remarked, confidentially, pushing the salt under his master's nose. "Bill is that ignorant, sir, of loife and sich, he erstonishes me."

Strange drank his beer with a look at the half-made creature who had plumbed 'loife' from the vantage-ground of her sewers.

"Very like his betters," he thought ; "we get lots of our views from a standpoint not one whit sweeter or cleaner than Tolly's."

He made a fresh dive into the *pâté*, and his thoughts broke out on a new track.

"I think we're going off somehow. I believe it is a good deal the women's fault. This new craze for advanced talk between the sexes is no good; the women who affect it are never clever enough nor good enough to make a success of the thing; it's a pose mostly, as their smoking is, just done for effect. Tolly, pass that jam!"

When he had rounded off his meal with a hunch of bread and strawberry jam, he stretched himself, went to the window and looked out, drumming gently on the pane.

"I wonder," he thought, "I wonder if I am quite a fool or not; but—but, God! how I love her!"

Then he stopped drumming, and began to wonder vaguely how in the name of Heaven he was able to eat great hunches of bread and jam not five minutes before.

He turned and watched Tolly through the door, devouring at his ease, with a sudden shock of disgust, more at himself than at the fellow, with his hideous mouth all moist and jammy. He turned again to the window and tried to steady his brain, but it reeled, and everything in the room swam before him; he dropped his head in his hands, and trembled from head to foot; when he raised it he felt steadier, and not so raging hot.

"I shall chance it," he said, "I shall chance it."

When he reached Lady Mary's he was in a much more wholesome frame of mind. He had gone there by roundabout ways, where he saw a good deal of stark, staring, naked humanity; this helped to crystallise

his emotions, to sift the dross out, and leave the clean stuff.

He never in his life felt clearer-headed than when he went up the stairs unannounced, and paused to look through the half-opened door at Gwen, sitting near a window in a cloudy dress of soft yellow crêpey stuff, and with her strong, long-fingered, composed hands lying idle in her lap, and the guard dropped from her eyes, showing a good deal more of herself than he had ever seen before.

He only paused for one minute, he had no right yet to the girl's secrets; then he threw open the door with a little bang, and brought her back to the present.

"Oh, is it you?" she said, with the ghost of a start, looking up at him.

She felt in a vague way that he knew more of her in that one minute than he had any business to do, and she was not quite sure if she liked it or not. He did not offer to shake hands with her, but glanced round the room silently. Gwen laughed.

"You are looking for Lady Mary?" she said. "She has a bad headache, an abnormally bad one, and won't be down till five."

He offered up a dumb thanksgiving, and sat down carefully; then he felt a horrible desire to say, "Hem!" or to mention the deuce, or the weather.

He had felt intensely reasonable the minute before, but he was confused by the beauty of the girl sitting so close to him, with the flickering sunshine running golden threads in and out her twisted russet hair, and clothing her in pale molten gold.

"She shall have nothing to add to her beauty," he

thought ; "I'll try at least not to desire the least of her when it is the greatest I want."

He started up, and asked if he might draw down the blinds.

"Yes," said Gwen wonderingly, as she saw his big brown hand tremble on the blind line.

Then a sudden certainty of his intention came upon her with a burst of angry horror, but she swept this off and waited coolly, with a sort of sneering excitement.

Strange drew his chair farther forward and sat facing her.

"Miss Waring," he said, "I have come to ask you if you will listen to the shady side of a man's life."

There was no more tremble or hesitation about him now, he looked as cool as she did.

"It is a side that men as a rule keep to themselves, and to their male companions ; no matter how near a man and a woman come to each other, this impalpable barrier keeps them apart. This has always struck me as a rather low form of lie, and distinctly dishonourable, especially when practised, as it is, by the stronger on the presumably weaker. If a woman is not strong, and pure, and magnanimous enough to bear this knowledge, a man should find it out, and go his way before he has dared to touch her life. If she is strong enough she should be given the opportunity of gaining this knowledge at first hand, and taking her subsequent course accordingly. You are immeasurably nobler than any other woman who has crossed my path."

Involuntarily he lowered his head as he spoke, in a reverential way that touched Gwen, and forced her to hear him. After the first disgusted shock, her impulse had been to send him about his business. She had

half-risen from her seat on the spur of this impulse, but somehow she had sat down again, and in spite of herself she had let him speak.

"No decent man could deceive you," he went on, "even if every word he spoke were to cut his own throat. May I speak to you as man to man?"

He watched the palpitations of her throat—which unfortunately were beyond her control—with a sort of choking sensation.

"Or more," he added simply, "as if you were God."

Gwen's colour neither increased nor left her, she neither trembled nor stirred. For a minute she was quite silent, except for one quick little swallowing sound; she was fighting with a concentrated, restrained frenzy of despair against her fate, against the overpowering longing to hear this man, as he sat there ready to spoil his own life sooner than lie to her, even in a fashion recognised by the use of generations.

She was quite aware she had nothing whatsoever to give him in exchange; she knew perfectly well she was about to do him a grievous wrong; and yet her whole being was concentrated into one imperative demand to hear what he had to say.

"You may speak," she said in a hard, emotionless voice.

Then he told her simply, with neither condonation nor reservation, the whole truth about his life.

It is all very well to talk glibly about the advantages of calling a spade a spade, but when it comes to giving dozens of spades their unvarnished titles in the presence of one virgin clean woman, and when every fresh spade may be about to dig up the heart you would foster, the matter is no joke.

By the time that Strange had arrived at the end of his unadorned record, his smooth, brick-dust cheeks looked grey and haggard, and his voice sounded tired.

Once during the recital Gwen had lost guard over herself and had let a flash of half-triumphant interest escape from her eyes. It was when he had said—"Thank Heaven! I never loved one of these women; that is, taking love in its all-round, large sense."

When he had finished he stood up and looked at her, waiting.

She had herself still in her power, she felt, with a wild leap of her spirit; she could yet ward off her fate and his; "his," she thought with a wave of soft, unaccustomed pity. She had nothing to give this man, nothing, not even the germs of a possible something—something called Love.

She laughed aloud, and looked in his face when the empty word stirred her brain; then she lowered her eyes, and turned all her thoughts in on herself, moving a small pearl ring up and down her finger, with a swift, rhythmic movement. This man would take her for mere hope—hope that had no foundation in fact; it was a mean exchange, nothing for everything,—mean and unjust; for the minute she was hideous to herself, with her own whole life a protest against the injustice of others.

She looked at him again, and a horrible power seemed to drag and bind her to him; she turned her eyes away angrily and made a little involuntary sound of trouble.

"Oh, if I only could treat him as I did the others!" she muttered under her breath, "but I can't, I can't!"

She was frightened at herself—at the power which drove her to the man inexorably ; she looked at the door and stirred in her seat, half-rising, but she sat down again, and began to move her ring with the old movement, only quicker, and with tenser fingers.

Then a cold feeling of finality came on her ; she knew she must say something, and she knew she was going to say the wrong thing ; an inexplicable smile flickered across her face and touched her mouth ; she grew quite calm and ceased to move her ring.

“You have done me a very high honour,” she said ; “thank you.”

He came nearer and looked down on her.

“I have tried to be perfectly honest,” he said, “and you have no idea what an awful grind it has been. It would be quite impossible for me to give you any idea of how I honour you, and as for love—” he stopped, breathing hard, “I have a heart full for you, dear ; I don’t think I know myself how much I love you.”

The girl looked at him curiously ; the simple intensity of his manner struck her, then her eyes fell and she sighed.

“Love is such a mere name to me,” she said ; “it seems such a collapsible, bubbly thing, and put to such feeble uses. You want me to be your wife, then, and you offer me a whole heart full of love, whatever that may mean. I must be honest too, and tell you that I shouldn’t know how to dispose of a whole heart full of love. I know nothing at all practically about the matter, and theoretically it has never interested me. My situation is hard to explain,” she exclaimed, with a petulant sweeping movement of her hand ; “in the face of all this I want to accept your offer, I don’t

know why ; I really believe it is not I, Gwen Waring, who wants this, it is something outside me that wants it for me. I never felt so impersonal in all my life."

He winced ; her honesty, to say the least of it, was a trifle bald.

"Perhaps I am more concerned in it than I think," she went on with a queer, intense serenity, dissecting herself audibly ; "I like new sensations ; I am curious ; most things are so flat and boring."

Strange started forward and was about to speak ; she raised her hand imperiously.

"Stop !" she cried, "I must finish ; I want you quite clearly to understand that if I take you at your word and become your wife—wife," she repeated, "how astonishing the word sounds in connection with me !"

She laughed in an odd way and went on,—

"Remember and understand that I am doing it as an experiment."

He flushed ; it was his own precise thought, but it seemed less hideous when thought than when spoken.

"An experiment," she repeated, "but whether it is fair to try experiments in lives is another matter. I wish—" she cast a half-wistful, half-provoked look at him, "I wish you were sufficiently clear and reasonable yourself to help me to answer the question—I am so ignorant in these matters."

A sudden crimson rushed to her cheeks ; she was furious. What right had she to blush like a dairy-maid and mislead the man ?

"I'm not blushing properly, as girls ought to blush," she explained ; "I am merely angry ; I feel caught in a trap. Why can't I tell you to begone, and leave me at

peace?" she demanded, looking at him with curious swift repulsion, "I have never found any difficulty before,—why don't you help me?"

In spite of his love, Strange shook with laughter.

It was no laughing matter for Gwen; she kept her eyes fixed on him, angry and full of pain.

"You stand there and laugh—laugh! I wish to mercy I could. Don't you know I am going to accept you—I, who don't know what love means—I, who am, I believe, sexless; don't you know you're mad, and don't you think it's rather degrading to give all you offer me for nothing? After all, it is not absolutely necessary to my salvation that I should make experiments on you."

She felt a sudden tiredness come on her, and nestled back in her cushions.

"I am ready to take you with open eyes, Gwen; you are very honest, dear; you will lose some of that when you have suffered a little," he added, with a ring of sadness in his voice, as he looked tenderly down on her.

She raised her head quickly. "Suffer! Why should I suffer?"

He watched her for a minute with sombre eyes.

"I don't know," he said half-absently, "but you will. Then this is our betrothal, is it, dear?"

She bowed her head.

"Oh, my darling!" he said suddenly.

"Will he often say it?" she thought curiously. "Can I stand this?"

"My darling, you have no idea how I shall enjoy giving you lessons in love."

"Will you?" she said grimly, "I doubt it; I tell

you I have no taste for the cult. Well, it is at least fortunate that one can be honest, and that it isn't necessary for me to befool you for the sake of your income. This marriage is the very perfection of an alliance from all such points of view, and yet—do you know, Sir Humphrey, I wish quite intensely we were both of us in another position, in quite a low, unknown one, then we need not marry. Engagements are nothing ; I know as much of you now as any engagement can teach me. We might then try a preliminary experiment as to how life together goes ; if it did not do, we might each go our own way and bury the past. I never wished for such a thing before ; it follows, I suppose," she added, with a mirthless little laugh, "that I care this much for you or for my experiment. Have you grasped the whole situation ?" she demanded, turning her troubled eyes full on him.

"My child, you have been very explicit ; I think I have quite grasped it. When will you marry me ?"

She gave a little start.

"I was wondering," she said, at last, "if this were final ?"

"It is final," he said ; "you know it is."

"Yes, I know ; it was rather paltry to pretend I didn't—oh !——"

She looked up at him, with her face held in both her hands. "Final ? yes, so it is. I am one section of a puzzle moved by fate, you're another. It is humiliating when one comes to think of it."

"Well ?"

"I will marry you when you like."

"The end of next month ?"

"Won't it interfere with the shooting ?"

"I had forgotten that—I don't think I shall mind—the end of July, then."

He took her hands and kissed them, and he thought, as he got out into the street, that he had felt them tremble. It was a pleasant surprise, on which he felt inclined to congratulate himself.

The knowledge had a quite other effect on his betrothed. She smote her clenched fists angrily together, and scorned herself for the feebleness of her extremities.

"Mean, deceitful wretch," she cried, "to mislead that man, when I am only tired, and wanting my tea!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE were some slight eruptions in the domestic circle at Waring Park before it was decided what form the wedding was to take. As might be expected, Mr. and Mrs. Waring in no way interfered, but kept themselves carefully aloof from the whole concern. But not so Dacre.

On hearing of the engagement, he swooped down on the paternal abode, all agog to have his say in the arrangements. He was now a budding warrior, full of himself and his profession, and horribly cocksure on all subjects in heaven and on earth ; a good, honest, affectionate creature of conventions, but with "a coarse thumb," which he wielded in a promiscuous style, and often planted sheer on the quick.

Dacre wanted a wedding that would have astonished the neighbours, and would more than probably have been the death of the two rarefied beings who had borne him ; but Gwen, backed by Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes, arranged things quite her own way.

The wedding was to be as quiet as a wedding can be. Neither Strange nor Gwen was rich in relations, which simplified matters. Lady Mary must come, of course, and the old Waring uncle, and one or two creatures of an unobservant and fossilised type,

not worth mentioning, besides a few of Strange's belongings.

As for friends, when Gwen began to cast about in her mind on that subject, she found that for her, putting aside Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes, none existed. Of the girl friends who usually flock in the wake of a bride Gwen hadn't a vestige.

She had gone to her room to straighten her thoughts after a hot encounter with Dacre, whose carnal mind still hankered after a proper full-blown wedding, and had been making itself objectionable in a bumptious, youthful style. She had lost her cool, scornful calm at last, and had given him such a glance from her big eyes as had quelled the British lion in him, and had accompanied it with a lash of her able tongue.

"Oh," she said, "you are anxious to amuse yourself by importing the world and the flesh down here—here! that they may sneer at two people who, if they have brought children into the world for pure purposes of investigation, are at any rate too good to make sport for your friends. You can get your world and your flesh elsewhere, not here, at my expense."

"I never saw any one just going to be married like you, before!" said Dacre, with a dash of his old astonished terror at her.

"Probably not, your experience not being wide."

"Strange is a million times too good for you!"

To his astonishment he got no immediate retort.

Gwen stood up, getting rather white, and went to the door. She stopped in the shadow of the threshold, and a grey shade fell on her face and made it whiter, but a sunbeam caught her hair, and turned it to the orange-gold that Dacre hated.

"Fools speak the truth a great deal oftener than they have any notion of," she said; "it is a pity that being thick-headed themselves they can't know how it hurts."

Now she was in her room reflecting gloomily on things in general.

"I never thought," she said, "I never thought that by any process of reasoning I should be ashamed of the fact of having no girl friends—I used rather to pique myself on it, but upon my word I am ashamed, I am degradingly, abjectly ashamed of it; it is one of the symptoms of my disease."

She went to the glass, and, crossing her arms on a little table near, she looked at herself, laughing.

"Would any one think it to look at me? I look so very sound and complete, and yet I am rotten at the core, a sort of Dead Sea apple. What a hackneyed order of fruit to belong to! I am not even original—ugh! I am inclined to think that if I were a downright bad woman, who had sinned, sinned solidly, and all for love—I wish to Heaven I could get the feelings of one of them just for five minutes, to understand this temptation which to me is so utterly incomprehensible—well, I really think that Humphrey would do better to marry a woman of this sort than me. It has come to a pretty pass when I—I, Gwen Waring, have taken to envying that sort of person!"

She raised her head, got to her feet, and went down and played for an hour; then she went out and walked, walked, walked, till she hadn't a leg to stand on, and could no more think than she could fly.

About a week before his marriage, Strange ran up to London for a couple of days; but even to Gwen

he did not specify the nature of his business, which altogether concerned Brydon's launching in life.

When he reached the studio, he found things looking pretty bad. Like many a better man, if his Art didn't drive him,—Brydon couldn't drive his Art; besides, his health was below par; there were days and days when he couldn't so much as paint a potboiler; then he starved.

He was learning Italian just now, to solace himself. Strange perceived, however, that the soft vowels hardly appealed to an empty stomach. Brydon was a haggard and distressful object, sitting with Dante on the table before him, smoking cheap tobacco, and with the ghastly beginning of a sketch crying shame on him from every corner.

"Goodness, how outrageously jolly you look! Is it engagement or ten thousand a year?"

"Oh, I'm all right, which is more than you look! Taken to shag, I see—well, I can stomach a lot, but not that. Would you mind chucking that pipe somewhere where it won't smell, and try some of my stuff, just to oblige me? Overheated Arab and shag are the two smells I draw the line at. Hallo!" he exclaimed, looking at one of the sketches.

"I am taking a holiday."

He was going on to lie a little,—but with a shrug he changed his course.

"I have to, as a matter of fact. I can't paint, I've lost the way. Do you ever forget the way to write?" he asked.

"Do I? The deuce I do! We all do at times; then we feel like throat-cutting or 'Rough on Rats.' However, I came on business. I have some spare

cash and I want to invest it, and on looking round I have come to the conclusion that you would be rather a good thing to put some of it into."

"I?"

"Yes, even your beastliest daubs have something in them that saves their souls. One has to look more than once at everything you do, even if it is only to swear at it. You have capacity somewhere about you, wherever you hide it—as for drawing, you don't know the beginnings of it! But what's that? You can learn; it's a mere question of swatting. If I had any doubt as to your success I wouldn't be here to-day. I never on principle put a penny into a rotten concern, and I am here to make you a definite, distinct offer, as binding on you as on me. I will defray your expenses in Paris for three years; I will give you enough to learn under the best men, and to live decently, not a farthing more,—don't speak yet!——"

Brydon had jumped up rather wildly.

"Wait till you hear all about it—your conditions are pretty hard. In case you should die during your apprenticeship—the best of us are liable to that contingency—I shall insist on you insuring your life for an amount equivalent to that I lay out on you. If you live (the best thing you can do under the circumstances), you shall pay me back principal and interest in a given term of years, say fifteen, after you begin to sell."

Brydon threw himself down into his chair, and buried his head in his hands; a limited diet of bread and mustard had taken the starch out of him. He was soft, and his eyes were brimful of tears; he was young too, and nearly burst in his efforts to bolt them;

then he lifted his head from his hands, and began precipitately,—

“You have given me the chance of a career, you put the world within reach of me, you trust me down to the ground, all in one breath. Look here!”

For one minute he was about to throw back the salvation waiting under his nose with most laudable self-respect, but he looked at Strange, and his heart got soft again.

“I’d black your boots for you, why shouldn’t I be dependent on you? I’ll take your offer, and—and—and ——”

“I told you the conditions, I shall stick to them; we don’t thank one another or get emotional in these transactions; I mean to have my money back, principal and interest, my full pound of flesh. I’m doing a trade with you—take it or leave it, as you like.”

“Do you know, I’d die for you?” cried Brydon, in a burst of low-diet mawkishness.

“Die, before you’ve paid in a penny of your premium! If we can come to terms off-hand, I should like to finish up the matter at once, and start for my lawyer’s.”

Brydon got up without a word, and began to make himself decent, with shaking hands. At last he found safety in a wild burst of gaiety, and by the time he had his best coat on, he was bubbling over with a nervous, gentle sort of fun peculiar to his kind.

When they were going downstairs he stopped, and remarked in a soft, deprecatory sort of way,—

“I say! I believe my heart’s next to gone. Three goes of rheumatic fever leave that part of a fellow not worth mentioning. Won’t that make the premium pretty stiff?”

"Probably, I never thought of that. However, it's you who will have to pay the piper, not I."

"You're an artist in conferring favours ——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, stow that!"

"I wouldn't take your offer, by Jove! I wouldn't, but that I mean to repay you."

"But I've already taken good care of that!"

"The money isn't everything," said Brydon impatiently; "there is such a thing as being proud of a fellow you've made, of valuing your own creation ——"

"All that comes in the contract; the sense of moral elevation it gives one to run a successful concern, even if it's only an artist, pleases the carnal mind. There was only the choice between you and a patent medicine; I'd have gone for that, but that I heard at the last moment that peppermint was the active principle in its manufacture. I draw the line at peppermint—and you were the only alternative. And, look here, old man.—But, good Lord! See that child there? Which is more human, the child's face or the monkey's on the organ? Upon my word, the imp scores off the beast only in the matter of cheek pouch. Look! how it hangs!"

Brydon shuddered.

"You always see the most hideous details! Couldn't you keep them to yourself! I shall dream of that child for a week."

"And yet you devour Zola? I had begun something, what was it? Oh,—if I were you I should walk gingerly as soon as you strike Paris pavement; there is something in it that drives fellows mad. London is a fool to it! It's a bad investment for any man, but it would spoil your work for a twelvemonth, if it

didn't give me my premium sooner than I want it. That weak heart of yours, Charlie, if you work the thing properly, should be as good as a family chaplain to you, and it isn't every man who can boast of as much."

"Talk of utilitarianism," sighed Brydon; "it is to be a struggle, then, between my natural instincts and my game heart. I wonder which will win?"

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN Gwen was dressing for her wedding, it never somehow struck her mother to go to her room, and Gwen had herself given an absolute command that no one should ask her to do so. She made no remark at all on the subject when she did not come, but she insisted on going to the church in the carriage with Mrs. Fellowes.

It was useless to oppose her, she was like adamant on this point, which set Dacre swearing madly. She was white and silent as they drove off. Mrs. Fellowes was silent too, and rather whiter, but she daren't show any feeling; they were on the brink of a general upheaval, and her whole energy must be concentrated to ward it off.

Gwen felt her situation with such cruel intensity, that even to herself she had to pretend to a total stony indifference; but when they got to the gates she sighed and stirred softly, and putting out her hand with unaccustomed wistfulness she laid it on Mrs. Fellowes'. It was cold and stiff. Mrs. Fellowes rubbed it gently between hers, and laid it lovingly against her cheek, and kept in her tears; she dared not speak.

"God help her, God help her, and God help

Humphrey!" she kept repeating to herself in a sort of childish entreaty.

"Gwen," she said at last, "you must not look like this when Humphrey sees you. Gwen, my darling, you have nothing to fear with such a man!"

"Do you think I fear him? I thought you would have known better: it is myself I fear."

"Yourself is a bogie you have set up, Gwen. Humphrey will soon demolish that!"

"I wish I felt sure of it. I wish I felt sure of anything. Upon my word, Mrs. Fellowes, upon my word, I wish from the bottom of my soul that I could say, with any decent show of honesty, God help us, Humphrey and me! But God never felt so unreal, such a mere bubble to please fools, as He does at this minute.—Don't, don't exclaim, or protest, or be shocked—not to-day, my wedding day, and such a brilliant match, too!" she added, laughing. "Ah, well! I won't hurt you, we'll leave that part. My father is to go through the farce of bringing me up to the altar, is he not?" she asked, thrusting all trace of emotion from her face, and sitting up straight.

"If you don't keep a very sharp eye on him he is sure to do something quite unique. If one could only wind him up, and touch springs at intervals! One can't, unfortunately, and I feel sure I shall be made ridiculous. Your eye must get off him now and again, so I suppose I may as well accustom myself to the thought," she went on with a shrug, "and resolve to swallow the whole hog without grimacing; but I do so loathe being made to look like a fool. Are we here? Oh, my flowers! The children have them perhaps? Yes, look!"

As she walked up the church, just touching her father's arm, and Mrs. Fellowes' two little nieces in white gauze and water lilies, looking like a pair of lilies themselves for softness and cool creaminess, trotting after her, her mother from her chancel pew caught sight of her for the first time.

For a minute Mrs. Waring looked dazed and frightened, then suddenly, with a broken, smothered cry, she leaned forward and threw out both her hands to her daughter, two big tears in her eyes, and her face tremulous with a great joy that was pain.

Mrs. Fellowes saw it; it was intensely pathetic to her, and a revelation. She had at last, at the end of all these years, seen a glimpse of this small, golden-headed creature's motherhood—after all she was really human! She hurried up, sat down beside her, and gently brought her back to herself. Then, with one of Mrs. Waring's hands caught in hers, as if she had been a child, she looked at Gwen, and wondered how on earth any girl with a stone for a heart could look as divine as she did. She looked round the church, and saw that every man, woman, and child was worshipping her in breathless silence. There was not a whisper, not a joke, not a smile.

As soon as the cake was cut, Gwen went away to dress. As she passed Mrs. Fellowes she whispered,—

“Will you help me? I want to speak to you. Mary, Mrs. Fellowes will help me to dress, and please don't cry,” she said wearily; “I shall see you often, and—really, I have given you no very special reason to cry for me.”

She half laughed, then she stooped and kissed the

old woman's cheek, and said, "You have always been so good to me, come and see me before I go."

When Mary had disappeared, choking, Gwen turned to the glass, and began to take off her bracelets.

"Sit down and let me take off your wreath," said Mrs. Fellowes.

"I wish I had done as Mr. Fellowes suggested," said Gwen at last, playing with a diamond dagger that Strange had given her, "and looked through that marriage service; it is a degrading thing to lie as I have done to-day. I might have been any common-minded, vulgar woman perjuring myself for a settlement. You see, I am marrying as a sort of experiment!—Oh, don't, you gave my hair an awful pull!—Humphrey knows it, but I didn't realise that I should actually have to swear to a lie—no experiment is worth that. I have put myself in a false position," she continued, stirring irritably, "from having told those miserable, blatant lies. I was never at a wedding in a church, in my life I always managed to escape that part, and I really never thought of the words, 'love, honour, and obey,' in any solemn, binding, personal connection. On the whole, it is a pity for women not to have been reared on Bibles and Prayer-books, it might keep them from some pitfalls, and no doubt the ordinary mother is useful too, in such cases."

Mrs. Fellowes' heart quivered painfully, and her hands trembled as she twisted up a coil of Gwen's hair that had come loose. She had suspected the truth very early in the day, but all through her short engagement Gwen had kept both Mrs. Fellowes and the Rector at arm's length.

"When I found out what I really was in for," went

on Gwen, "it was too late to draw back—no, it wasn't!" she cried, "the habit of lying is growing on me, but then I was ashamed, too much of a coward."

"This is very sad," said Mrs. Fellowes at last; "it is so sad, dear, that one can hardly speak of it. No woman has the right to try experiments, to play pranks with hearts and souls. You deserve—ah, what a brute I am! I have no right to scold you, my poor Gwen, you'll have to pay dearly enough for your play. You will know some day what you have done," said she, laying her soft, warm cheek down on the girl's head in the caressing way she had when Gwen was a child; "then you will suffer—ah, child, how you will suffer! But it is Humphrey one feels for now. Gwen, you must not let him feel you are so far from loving him."

"He knows. You don't suppose I lied to him?"

"He knows in a way, but he doesn't realise the knowledge, nor does he quite know the material he has to work on, or how the twist came into the warp and woof of it. Gwen, don't let your horrid truthfulness make you cruel; be patient, dearest, be patient; this love won't come like a shock, it will steal in on you, and I am perfectly convinced your first impulse will be to kick it out."

Gwen gave a little laugh.

Mrs. Fellowes dropped the brooch with which she was going to fasten Gwen's collar, went a few steps away, and looked at her.

"Humphrey knows precious little about you," she cried, with some natural irritation, "he is dazed, small blame to him! so am I, so is John, we are all dazed."

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears

"We all pour out our love on you, and—and for what? Just for a cold ghost of a thing, for mere hope. Hope! what good is that to any man? Now, look here, Gwen, don't let Humphrey know this, naked truth though it be. There is no lie in the matter; you can love, darling, you can; 'tis only the learning that is the trouble for you; but I have a dreadful, hateful presentiment, in spite of all I can say, that your most objectionable direct methods will run you into deplorable difficulties."

"Truth is tangible, even if it is brutal," said Gwen; "but love—love—love, this intangible, vague horror, why should I be persecuted with it, why should I realise now, that, vague as the thing is, it is sacred, and a sort of crime of a very low order to be incapable of it? I got as far as that in church to-day, with all those glaring faces on me, and Mr. Fellowes' eyes—he has no right to look through people like that!"

She turned away to hide the crimson in her cheeks.

"Then this one-flesh business, this is a horrid thing."

She squeezed her hands into her eyes.

"This is maddening!" she cried, and sprang up and stood looking out of the window.

"One flesh!" she murmured breathlessly. "One flesh!"

Presently she shook herself, and with a long sigh brought the calmness back into her face; then she went and put her two hands on Mrs. Fellowes' shoulders and looked down on the sad face with a little laugh.

"Look here!" she said, "advise every girl you care about, not to try experiments in marriage, and to read the marriage service with the man she is engaged to

standing opposite to her, before she dares to quote from it in church before all the rag-tag and bobtail of society. And now, give me my hat and kiss me; you don't know how much a part of my life your love for me is, even though it is fed on hope only, and—I shall try to be honest to myself without any flagrant brutality to Humphrey," she said, laughing; "I think that is all I can promise just yet. Ah, what a lovely scheme of colour!" she cried, looking at her superb figure, in its dusty-amethyst gown, with the flashes of lemon-yellow in it.

"Do you think my father and mother are awake to the fact that I am married to-day?" she demanded.

"If you had heard your mother's cry when she saw you go up the aisle, and had seen her face—as long as I live I shall never forget either!—you would have no need to ask such a question," said Mrs. Fellowes, with gentle gravity.

"I thought she looked rather different from what she usually does; and I fancied my father's arm trembled when I held it. So!" she said, with a half-mocking smile, as she fastened the top button of her glove, "so marriage is so solemn and sacred a subject that it has actually touched the human part of those two people!—Ah, Mary, here I am, ready for my new life—do you like me? The outside is satisfactory, is it not? It is quite pleasant to feel so like a whited sepulchre!" she said to Mrs. Fellowes, as they went down the stairs, "it excites me."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN the two drove away on the first stage of their experiment, Mr. and Mrs. Waring, the Rector and Mrs. Fellowes, Dacre, and a few others, stood watching them from the great stone steps of the hall.

Mrs. Fellowes was reflecting with mixed feelings on Gwen's good-bye to her mother, which by chance she had witnessed. The girl had already, in the face of every one, bidden her a quiet and emotionless farewell; but just at the last she had swept round suddenly, as if she were driven, and had caught the little, dazed creature—a deal too young to be her mother—in her arms, and had given her an imperative hug of the volcanic order. As it was a first experience, no one could blame the little woman for shrinking visibly from it, and, when it was over, for escaping with a sigh to the side of her husband, and slipping her hand into his with the air of one who has escaped a danger. Gwen allowed one flash of angry pain to shoot from her eyes, then she walked grandly out of the house with her hand quite properly on her father's arm, which Dacre took good care to have in readiness.

“Dacre!” said Mrs. Fellowes, as soon as they were well off, “we must get rid of these people. I am sure we have all done our duty by them, and

your father and mother have, very obviously, had enough of them."

"I am ready to swear that Admiral Trowe has had a good sight too much of the governor. He has been hammering into him the life and blow-up of that grey rock at Henty's they are always grubbing at, for a solid ten minutes. Now he's on selection, and the Admiral has murder in his eye—look!"

"Yes, and your mother, see how tired she looks! She is telling Mrs. Irvine the most wonderful new facts about babies. Mrs. Irvine has ten, two sets of twins among them, and she is the champion mother of the parish. Dacre, you cover one wing, I shall manœuvre the other, there's not a minute to lose."

In next to no time they had cleared the field, and Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes were just about to say good-bye, and to carry Dacre off to dinner, when to their amazement, after a hurried consultation, Mr. and Mrs. Waring begged them to stay, and drew them into the library, utterly ignoring the furious Dacre, who betook himself, softly swearing, to the stables, where he wandered disconsolately, scathing the screws that lumbered the stalls, and thanking God lustily that his stud was elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes were closeted together in the library. While the other two looked silently and questioningly at one another Mrs. Fellowes telegraphed despairing signals to her husband.

"It has been a most wearing day," said Mr. Waring, at last; "I feared my wife would break down under the strain. No doubt you felt it too?" he went on, with his eyebrows raised, looking concernedly at his guests. "I thought, my dear," and he pressed her hand,

"I thought, my dear, that our daughter Gwen bore it admirably; the girl appears to have much courage, the courage of your race, my love."

He beamed softly down on her, and paused for an unconscionable time, then suddenly he remembered himself, and started.

"Our daughter Gwen is a very beautiful person," he went on, musing aloud. "I do not think I ever noticed the fact until lately, until that night she went to some—h'm—party with Lady Mary. Dearest, do you recollect?"

"Perfectly," said Mrs. Waring, getting a shade paler, and with a troubled look in her eyes; "you saw her, Mrs. Fellowes," she said, with sudden eagerness, "that night?"

"I did indeed; Gwen's beauty was a shock to me. But I didn't know—that is, I thought you were busy."

"Ah yes, very busy, I remember; but we came out to see Gwen; she was on the stairs, and we got no farther than the door; the lamplight shone on her and cast soft, strange, lovely shadows on her white silk—it was silk, was it not, Mrs. Fellowes?"—She nodded. "And her arms and neck were like—down——"

"Snow," murmured her husband.

"No, dear, they looked too warm for that; and her face! We were, I think, a little frightened at its beauty."

She gave a little shy laugh.

"We should have come out, but just then I do not think I could have spoken. My husband thought I was not very well, and he brought me back—Henry spoils me, Mrs. Fellowes—but to-day I shall never

forget Gwen's look, never !” and her small face got still one shade whiter.

She tried to say something, but she only made a little husky noise ; she turned to Mrs. Fellowes, and tried again.

“You know Gwen,” she said faintly ; “do you think she was happy to-day, as a bride should be ? ”

Mrs. Fellowes looked keenly at her, and turned to her husband.

“Mrs. Waring must lie down, she is worn out,” she said.

He made ready the sofa, and drew the trembling, small creature down on it.

Mr. Waring yielded her up with a disturbed and astonished gaze, and stood aside, contemplating events patiently.

“Henry,” she said softly, after resting silently for a minute, “ask Mrs. Fellowes what we want to know—tell her our—our fears.”

He came over and laid his hand on his wife's sunny head, that time seemed to have quite forgotten.

“My dear friends,” he said solemnly, “my wife and I are in some perplexity. The fact is—h'm—we have never, so to speak, known much of our daughter Gwen, she is a difficult person to know. From time to time we have attempted to gain some nearer knowledge of her, but she—ahem—in fact, did not seem inclined to encourage our advances. From her very babyhood,” he went on more fluently, “the girl has interested us very keenly, she has been quite a study to us ; but I regret to say we have never arrived at any very definite conclusions about her, we have never quite understood her.”

"Never!" said Mrs. Waring, suddenly bending towards Mrs. Fellowes, with a look very like terror in her face.

"Of course you more than I, dear," said Mr. Waring; "you have your woman's instincts to guide you, and they, as a rule, are trustworthy."

"I have never known Gwen," said she, with very unusual decision.

"What is your opinion on this matter?" said Mr. Waring, turning to Mr. Fellowes, "you know our daughter."

It was all cruelly pathetic,—his voice, and his face, and his gesture, and the strained, hopeless look in his small wife's eyes.

"Gwen is not ready yet for complete happiness," said Mr. Fellowes; "when she is, it will come to her in full measure."

"But—she is a person of intelligence, and what is called grown-up," said Mr. Waring anxiously, "and very perfect in her development—outwardly," he added, a doubtful look fleeting across his face.

"Yes, to look at, she is perfect; but does it not strike you," said Mrs. Fellowes slowly, "that much of Gwen's womanhood is still elemental? Do you not think that some of her senses are also still in that condition?"

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Waring, looking sadly down on his wife, "Ah! I have thought, I have feared this. I cannot see in our daughter Gwen a complete creature; but I thought, knowing so little of women as I do, that I might have been mistaken. Do you hope for ultimate completeness in our daughter?" he asked suddenly, watching curiously for the answer.

The Rector's superior knowledge of Gwen had fixed

him very uncomfortably on a pedestal; there was no getting off it just yet, he had to make the best of the situation.

"Indeed I do; no half development will content Gwen when she learns her deficiencies, or her husband either."

"These elements, then, may develop to ultimate greatness, or wither and die—to reappear, of course, in some form or other. But to disappear from our knowledge untimely! Ah! that would be sad waste. We will hope it may not occur. Do you happen to know if her husband looks on our daughter as we do, in relation to her ultimate possibilities of development, or if he has chosen her for the thing she looks—a most beautiful and finished young woman of fair intelligence?"

"I am quite sure that Strange loves Gwen strongly and truly," began Mr. Fellowes evasively.

It was a difficult subject to thrash out thoroughly with this wonderful pair; it might be better to let it fade gradually from their minds, and to aid them to glide back into their own still waters.

"Yes, but on what grounds?" went on Mr. Waring with strange persistence.

"Have you ever spoken to Strange himself on the subject?" asked Mr. Fellowes.

"Ahem, no. In fact, under like circumstances," he reddened and coughed a little, "I should myself have resented any attempt of such a nature. No, I did not put any questions to Strange. But will you not favour us with an opinion, you, who know our daughter so well?"

"I think that, in a measure, Strange knows what he is about, and we are bound to trust his judgment. It

would be folly to suppose that he sees the entire truth clearly, he is under the usual conditions of a man in love. Gwen dominates him, as she does even us old married people ; hearts and brains will always fall before our Gwen."

"What is the entire truth?" said Mrs. Waring, pushing her hair back and sitting up.

"The truth as it strikes me," said Mr. Fellowes very gently, "is, that Gwen is at present incapable of loving."

"You refer—ahem, to that phase of the emotion known as sexual love?" said Mr. Waring hurriedly.

"Or of any other yet."

"I knew it, we both knew it, but it was hard to speak out," murmured Mrs. Waring sadly.

"She was in no way constrained," said Mr. Waring in a frightened way.

His wife sat still with sad, wide eyes.

"It seems a reasonless thing in one in Gwen's position," he went on, with a fine touch of pride, "to marry without love. I know such things do happen now and again with young portionless women—women have a feline craving for soft living and pretty things, but our daughter Gwen—ah!"

"I thought all this, I knew it," said Mrs. Waring quietly; "I wished so often to ask Gwen definitely for the truth, but I did not seem able to do so; I wish now I had."

Mrs. Fellowes put her hands tenderly on her shoulders and made her lie down again.

"She will love, she will be happy!" she whispered softly; "she is in good hands."

"Too soon, too soon!" murmured the mother;

"she should be in mine still. But they never held her. She should be happy now, now," she cried, with sudden passion, her voice still in soft minors, "not in the future! Why should she have to reach her happiness and her love 'through much tribulation'? It should come by divine right. She is so strong, she will suffer strongly; she is so strong that when passion comes to her it will tear her, torture her, break her to pieces! Henry, Henry," she gasped, "we are to blame; we have failed miserably! We never had any right to have children. While we have been worrying over the dry fossils of the past we have allowed the living—the young—to wither around us. Ah, how sad it all is, how sad!" she sighed, "how sad!"

The Rector came and put his hand on his wife's shoulder softly. He well knew how awful this too-late awakening of the other woman's motherhood was to her, with her own so terribly, persistently wide-awake, and alive with the throbbing of unsatisfied pain.

There was nothing further to be said—nothing, altogether unsatisfactory as everything was. Mr. Fellowes felt this, and said, in his bright, frank way,—

"We are all very tired, and you—" he said, turning to his wife, "you are frightfully washed out! And, good gracious! Dacre is waiting all this time!"

To her own intense amazement, Mrs. Fellowes stooped down and gave Mrs. Waring a kiss.

The other's tremor went through her like an electric shock, and she did not get over it for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE day after the wedding Dacre decided to depart in rather indecent haste. The situation was too much for him.

All the morning he had been receiving a succession of small shocks, but some time after lunch he experienced an awful one. He caught his mother's eyes fixed on him with such a dumb yearning as would have upset a rhinoceros, not to say Dacre, and he could have sworn to two tears that gathered in them and were as suddenly dried up. He blushed furiously and fled, in a terrible access of shyness, to the Rectory, where he astonished Mrs. Fellowes by the heat of his countenance and his greedy consumption of tea.

"Good gracious!" she thought, "is he in love—Dacre?"

She took up her cup, and, gulping down her tea in rather a hysterical way, she watched him over the edge of it.

"The colour, and the stutter, and that awful thirst, they are all deadly symptoms. On the contrary, the amount of cake he swallows goes against it. What can it be, anyway? Mercy! Can't he hurry? I feel worn out between them all."

Presently Dacre recovered a little and began to talk

in a desultory way, saying a vast number of things he didn't want to say, but on the whole lucidly enough.

Mrs. Fellowes pricked up her ears and grew keen all over ; she got for her pains little direct information, but, with a previous experience of the family, enough to go on.

"Worse than lovers !" she thought ruefully, "poor little woman ! All the same, I am not the least surprised he wants to 'clear'—he ought to stay, though !"

"Dacre, your mother will miss Gwen more than any of us think ; you have no idea how upsetting a wedding is ; you might come in very useful just now. Won't the regiment survive if you stay down for a few days ?"

Dacre wriggled on his seat.

"Mrs. Fellowes, I have to go back ; it is absolutely imperative."

She laughed. "So it seems by the look of you !"

"Look at that big fellow !" she thought, "who fears neither man, death, nor devil, nor God much to speak of, routed by one flash of feeling from an unexpected quarter. The creatures can't stand the unexpected at all ; they are intrinsically conventional ! If that fool had a glimmer of sense in him, he would have given the poor little woman a hug, and have let her have a comfortable, easy howl for once in her life. I suppose she is doing problems with the old fossil in the library instead."

Dacre felt his size frightfully, and began to contrast it mentally with the Sevres cup in his hand. He set it down, and, towering huge above Mrs. Fellowes, delivered himself of another solemn asseveration as to the impossibility of staying one day longer.

"My dear boy, I am quite convinced," she said, "if you did, your country must infallibly burst up."

"Mrs. Fellowes, that isn't fair!"

"No more it is! Sit down, Dacre; I have to shout to make my voice reach you up there, and yours comes down on me like a thousand bricks. What do you want me to do?"

He gave a sigh of relief and settled down comfortably.

"I want you to go and see her," he said, "and—oh, you know best then what to do. Don't you think—I don't know, but perhaps if you were to take her out for a walk or something.—Oh, good-bye, Mrs. Fellowes, and thanks, thanks, most awfully!"

Mrs. Fellowes watched him swing along down the drive, then pull up with a jerk to speak to her husband, who was coming up, then swing off again out of sight.

"Poor old Dacre! But why didn't he kiss her?—the fool. I suppose he wasn't 'game.'"

She put some fresh tea into the pot, and set her kettle on the little spirit lamp to boil up.

"Has Dacre been making you a declaration of unlawful love?" said the Rector when he came in. "He had precisely that air."

"Worse than that a thousand times. His mother looked like crying, and was on the point of breaking out into sudden and condign maternal affection. Dacre fled incontinently. He is going to make a precipitate retreat to his regiment, and he came to plant me in the breach. The longer one lives the less one thinks of the courage of your sex."

"Want of experience makes cowards of us all. You couldn't expect the fellow to face the unknown!"

"That's it, you are all tarred with the same brush ; you must have brutal sight to steady your nerves. Now—we——"

"You! You, my love, have intuition. Besides, there is a quotation that might apply, 'Fools rush in——'"

"Do drink your tea, and don't try to be funny; I feel awful."

"I feel rather off myself ; I have just been at the Park."

"Oh, oh! What were they at?"

"Waring was lost in some new speculation, his wife was lost in a bad dream. I suppose this late awakening of her nature is good for her, but it seems cruel. It hurts one to see her suffer in that still, patient way of hers, and it will play the deuce with Waring's way of life if it goes on. It wasn't nature, of course, but that absolute oneness of their life was a beautiful thing to watch, and quite unique. I suppose I ought to be glad that it has received this check, but I'm not."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself for wanting to perpetuate such a life. Have you forgotten Gwen's face?"

"Shall I ever forget it, Ruth? But anything absolutely unusual in a sober married couple, and in a Midland parish on a clay soil, the carnal mind will cling to like any burr. Let us put the moralities aside for a moment and consider the subject with the pagan mind. What would outside life be to you or to me in these smug levels, except for that delicious pair of maniacs? We both know how stodgy undiluted duty grows, how one's feet stick and stumble

in it, faithfully as one tries to keep one's eyes on the 'everlasting hills'; how dreary and hopeless work often seems in scattered districts, with neither abject poverty nor active crime to fight against, to raise and keep alive in one the inspiring battle greed. But to be obliged to face a level life daily; to spend one's soul in trying to raise sodden dough; to galvanise half-dead things, heavy, dull, sullen hearts, neither hot nor cold, desiring neither good nor evil, knowing neither tears nor laughter, but slogging on to the grave in dreadful patience! And, in spite of exceptions, this is the life of dozens of country parsons, only we hold our tongues about it, or else we hunt and fatten ourselves, or we have big families to blunt our feelings."

"John, what's wrong?" she said.

He stroked her hair softly.

"Nothing except myself, I suppose. You know I was at the Low Church Meeting yesterday, and the fellows tried me, some of them are so intense as regards food—that isn't so indecent as haste, however. In the hurry to gobble his brown soup that he might have a go at the white, Lang nearly choked himself. Then it went against one to see how they swallowed syrupy port; one could feel the saccharine sediment on one's tongue; it showed somehow a defective development. Then when gossip, chiefly concerning the gone-astray young women of the neighbourhood, set in, they grew so keen on their subject that three of them fairly spluttered. When this course was removed and religion brought on, one seemed to get a blow at every turn, the meat and the drink had got into our souls and it came out in our speech.

"It looks well for me, little woman, me, a middle-

aged country parson, with a fat parish, and reputed sane ; but I would give it all, and my eyes into the bargain, to be in the thick of the turmoil—I don't care a rap where, London holds no talisman for me any more than any other big centre—where men teem and life lives, for it seems even better to live in pain than to doze in apathy. Ah ! if only my brutal health would have stood it !”

“Poor John, how the old sore will break out !” she said tenderly, with a short, dry little sob ; “and I, too, I would give it all, and my eyes to boot, if I had just one little child. And Mrs. Waring, up there in her fine house, would give it all if she could only grasp her lost motherhood. Two old sores and a new !

“After all,” she added, “when all's said and done, we are no worse off than our neighbours. None of us, it seems to me, get any more than the rags and fragments of their hearts' desires, and yet we all manage to make life jolly on them. We do, John,” she said, with a gay little laugh.—It was wonderful how she managed it with her heart quivering.—“Look in my face and say we do !”

He looked in her face, and he kissed her.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN Strange set out on his honeymoon, it was with a distinct project simmering in his brain. He meditated a good three months' loiter through the byways of the Tyrol, on into Switzerland, and then home through the towns of the Netherlands, and all by routes best known to himself.

It becomes, however, a moral impossibility for a man to loiter with any comfort by the side of a new-made wife, into whose very bones and marrow the spirit of unrest has crept; and so, by intangible gradations, the loiter had developed into a tumultuous forging on.

Gwen seemed possessed by a very dignified and quite calm-seeming devil; he was a gentlemanly creature, and made no untoward fuss or excitement, but movement he must have, he dared not rest.

In spite of herself, Gwen found growing in her, from the very day of her marriage, a craving, full of subdued fierceness, to be in the very middle of the hurly-burly, no matter whether it raged in a fashionable hotel, or in the market-place of a country town. She had, besides, other uncomfortable ways. In valleys, where the sun shone and the wind rested, and where ordinary mortals were bathed in a soft entrancement of delight, she seemed to lose half her life.

On the contrary, she lived—her voice regained its

timbre, her eyes shone, her mouth laughed, her hair sparkled with vitality—as soon as ever she got high on a mountain—the bleaker and harsher the better.

One day they had climbed to the top of the D'Auburg, a dour-looking mountain in the Tyrol, generally avoided of tourists, but for some reason Gwen took it into her head to ascend it.

She now sat glowing and tingling with radiant health, leaning up against a rock that sheltered her from the blast which was screeching across the ledge of the mountain. She looked as cool, and as beautiful and unruffled, as if she had just dropped from the clouds, instead of climbing up to them by a most villainous path. There was always a sort of exotic splendour about her, and yet she never seemed out of place.

“Are you never tired?” said her husband, as he was pouring some wine into a little silver cup.

“Never! I don’t remember ever once having been tired.”

“Looked at from the carnal mind of a chaperon, that was rather a nuisance, wasn’t it?”

“It was; Lady Mary suffered a good deal from it. I used to try to accommodate myself to her in this matter, and to look tired, but I never could manage it.”

“Have another sandwich?”

She went on in a reflective way as she ate it,—

“It is a wretched thing, generally, for a woman to be absolutely untireable. A very strong woman is docked of half the privileges of her sex. If you notice the stock, devoted husband, he has always a sickly creature of a wife to devote himself to—or one who poses as sickly—or if her body isn’t sickly her brain is. You

hardly ever find a woman quite sound in wind and limb and intellect, with an absolutely unselfish husband, ready to think all things for her, and to dance attendance on her to all eternity. Helplessness is such supreme flattery. I tell you, the modern man doesn't like intellect, any more than his fathers before him did, if it comes home too much to him."

"No! Sickliness and softness of brain don't, however, appeal equally to all men."

"I suppose not; but the things they carry in their train do. The parasitical, gracious, leaning ways, the touch of pathos and pleading,—those are the things I should look for if I were a man, they charm me infinitely. Then that lovely craving for sympathy, and that delicious feeling of insecurity they float in, which makes the touch of strong hands a Heaven-sent boon to them—those women, you see, strew incense in your path and they get it back in service. When one hears of a devoted couple, and is called on to admire with bated breath, I never can till I have dug out the reason of this devotion. I hate sticking up people on pinnacles, and then having to knock them down like a pair of nine-pins."

"Hero worship isn't your tap evidently; but if one makes a principle of never smelling a flower or eating fruit until one has ascertained the manure used in its growth, one gets put off a lot. By the way, I haven't noticed any marked symptoms of mental or physical decay in you, and yet, God knows and can possibly score up the number of your lovers—they certainly were beyond all human computation."

She flashed a quick, curious look at him and smiled.

"My lovers? They weren't lovers at all, they were

explorers, experimental philosophers. They had the same strong yearning for me that a botanist has for a blue chrysanthemum, or a yellow aster. If a man could succeed in getting this thing he would go mad over it, and put it in the best house in his grounds for all his neighbours and friends to admire ; but do you think he would love it, like an ordinary sweet red rose, that he can gather, and smell, and caress, and bury his nose in, and wear near his heart ? Not he !

“Do you think one of these men ever wanted to touch me,” she went on calmly, taking little sips of wine, “or to ruffle the hair round my forehead, which is their invariable habit in novels, or to lay his hand on my bare shoulder—they do that, too, I have read—or to clasp me to his breast, the climax to these pretty little customs of theirs ? Goodness ! And imagine my feelings if one had ! But they didn’t even want to ; and yet they were my slaves, to do with precisely as I liked.

“When I was in the thick of it I thought I could not live without all this, yet it was disappointing on the whole, I believe. I remember wishing, now and then, that I could flirt like other girls, and make men make palpable fools of themselves for my sake. It looks such a very delightful pastime ! I have seen plain girls look positively quite beautiful when engaged in it. The undercurrent of heaps of girls’ lives, upon which it seems to me all the rest is built up, is a sort of simmering, unconfessed, vague longing for the sensation of being ‘caught and kissed,’ like the little brown maid in the old rhyme ; not in a general vulgar way, but in a well-bred particular way. It is a quite incomprehensible sensation to me.”

"Probably. It's natural all the same," he said, looking at her eyes, which regarded him curiously; "and Nature is such a vindictive, grasping beast it is as well not to run counter to her, or she will have limb for limb."

"I wonder which limb of mine she will want?"

"Oh you, she'll trip you up in your own coils somehow! Fill you with an overpowering desire to be 'caught and kissed,'" he said, with a short laugh, "and have no one handy to do it."

"Oh, then she must make me over again!"

She stood up and looked down over the gloomy valley. "What is it to be natural, I wonder? I don't know."

"Time will tell you all about it. Now, you want to be down over that precipice? Well, anyway, I am glad you are warranted sound. Come on, my yellow aster!"

They were past the precipice, far down the other side, when Gwen spoke again.

"Humphrey," she said, with a stronger trace of emotion in her voice than he had ever detected there before, "upon my word, I often wish for your sake I was just a good, common, frowsy red cabbage-rose."

"Ah, do you?—Well, '*die Zeit bringt Rosen!*'"

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABOUT a week later they arrived in Paris. Gwen had never been there before, and her curiosity to see everything was insatiable and unrelenting.

She often seemed to herself as if she were caught in the whirl of a mad, intoxicating race with fate ; it was glorious ; it stimulated her like a draught of wine ; it filled her veins with fire ; it was as if the spirit of the world had got into her spirit, and shot streams of the strength of immortality through all her being.

She was as a god to herself, and fate was as a thing of naught. This was in her times of exaltation, however ; but even in these early days there came moments of reaction in their due season. Fortunately she knew the symptoms of their approach, and could hide herself away from her husband's eyes. Her room could tell strange tales whenever Gwen shut herself in and threw up the sponge till the next round.

Then there came shame into that proud face, fear into those fearless eyes, a stoop into those stoopless shoulders. She neither ranted nor raved, she dared not ; if she had once raised her voice, she knew quite well she must shriek and howl forth the terror and disgust and dismay with which the possible ending to this race with fate filled her.

Sometimes she would pull off her shoes and stockings, and go barefooted to and fro the length of the long polished floor with its strips of Eastern carpet—the cool, slippery surface soothing the fever of her flying feet. Invariably she would pull off her guard and wedding-ring, and lay them with curious, gentle wistfulness down on the table. Once when she did this, she drew a deep breath, threw out her arms, and laughed.

“I am free, free!” she cried, “my body is my own again, and my soul, and my brain! I am myself again, Gwen Waring, a self-respecting creature, with no man’s brand on me ——”

In a few minutes she came back and looked at the golden bands.

“What is the use of lying?” she said, “that mends nothing, and only degrades me. I am not free; whatever happens, whatever could possibly happen, I shall never any more be what I was! Good God! And yet women take marriage as they do a box at the Opera!”

But it was not in the strong nature of her, wholesome what there was of it awake, to lose courage often, and her powers of recuperation were superb. Half an hour after she had been striding wildly through the room she came down as unruffled and more untranslatable than ever, to propose some expedition.

Strange looked at his watch. “Too late for that; suppose we go and see Brydon?”

“Oh, yes, let us go,” she said eagerly.

He looked at her, and knew all about it.

For a minute he felt an overmastering desire to shake her, and make her eyes speak plain English,

he was getting tired of their hieroglyphics. He was buttoning her glove at the time, and involuntarily he gave the button a cross twist and twitched it out.

"Oh, hang it! Is the glove rotten, or are my methods? Will it matter?" he asked.

"Oh, not at all; my sleeve will cover it."

It was a diabolical lottery altogether, and the soul of the man groaned within him. It was even worse than he had anticipated in the first hot glamour of love. He freely confessed this, but he had sworn to himself, in his foolish raptures, that he would face hell for the girl, and he was not the man to eat his words.

They walked to Brydon's.

Gwen took a great delight in going in and out among the streets, and a shamefaced pleasure in listening to her husband's stories of every twist and turning in them.

"There is no one like him for a companion," she often confessed to herself angrily; "no one I know who comes near him. What made me marry him, what? Even this part of him I can't accept and enjoy without disgust and self-loathing."

At last they got to the little street in which Brydon lived, and climbed to the fourth flat of a tall house.

When Brydon saw Strange he reddened with delight; but when he was presented to Gwen, he paled suddenly, and his eyes fell.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather!" he explained afterwards, to his chosen comrade.

It was a superb compliment to her, and her husband laughed as he saw it. And then a queer wonder took hold of him as to the sort of ending this good-humoured,

half-impersonal pride he took in her conquests would have; then this evolved another wonder, which dealt with the birth of a strong woman's passion.

Strange pulled himself up and thrust this out of his mind with a rough shove.

"On the whole, what's the result so far, Charlie?" he asked, when that young man had established his wife in a big cane chair, softening the light from one side and strengthening it from another in a lingering, absorbed way, as with half-closed eyes he furtively drank in the fulness of her beauty.

The question stripped the glamour from him at a rush; he flopped limply down on to a seat.

"If only you hadn't asked that question for three more months; but now, now, it is cruel! Just imagine a fellow, free all his life to ride his own nag,—a sorry jade it might be, but anyway fit enough for him, and his own; just fancy him strapped on to a small donkey belonging to another fellow, that it would be more than his life was worth to prod into a gallop, and to have to peg along on this beast, week in, week out, along the same old road! Oh Lord! the grind, it's awful, awful, digging one's heels into that confounded ass—Oh! ——"

He jumped up with a guilty start. "Lady Strange, I beg your pardon; I forget what ladies are like, and Strange is such a comfortable fellow to growl to, bad language slips out before one can catch it, at the very sight of him."

"Don't apologise to me, especially if my husband is the cause of your offence," said Gwen kindly.

She had a fancy to be kind to this boy; if she had confessed it to herself, it was with a distinct view of

getting to know a side of her husband that Brydon knew all about and she nothing. She was making a study of him in spite of herself, and liked to collect evidence.

Meantime Strange had been looking carefully through some of Brydon's sketches, scattered everywhere.

"You'll draw as well as you colour, old man," he said at last, "and that is more than I ever expected of you. What does Legrun say?"

"He says he'll say nothing until I have unlearned every cursed mannerism I have picked up in England, that den of bad taste. Then '*peut être*—who knows?'

"But the fellow rages just as much against his own rapid methods as he does against those we've been born and bred in. How dare we think to get an effect with a few strokes as he does, he, who has worked, *parbleu!* who has sweated, who has prayed, who has blasphemed, who has torn the heart out of his body to arrive at this ease, this divine confidence—'the head of us should be punched!'—he is great in English. We must take twenty strokes to one of his; we must do with pain, with tears, what is but '*delices*' to him; details—we must know them as the '*bon Dieu*' knows them, before we venture to omit or even to suggest one! Then he ups and splutters out some delicious blasphemy on some unwary youth's head.

"Look at me, the ghost of a creature, stalking mournfully on eggs, with furtive fear in all my lineaments. And this is an artist's training! Good Lord, when I remember how I sat in that garret in Bland Street, and thought of fame and myself in a new suit, dancing a war-dance before my masterpiece on the line, with duchesses squabbling for the first shake of my

hand!—Lady Strange, I am going to make some tea."

"I wish you would," said Gwen laughing; "we walked, and I am so thirsty."

"Hu!" said Brydon, examining his milk-jug when he had filled his kettle and set it on the little charcoal stove, "every drop gone! I won't be two minutes. The old lady on the first flat and I are affinities to a certain extent; in return for sundry packets of English tea she keeps me in milk at odd times. Strange, will you shepherd the kettle?"

"I wonder if his cups are clean?" said Strange, rummaging them out of a cupboard over the stove. "Look, an inch thick with dust; and the handles! That fellow moons too much to be very cleanly. Look at the tea-cloth,—Lord! Have you a clean handkerchief, Gwen?"

Gwen's brows contracted slightly. She was a dainty person and unpractical, and teacups in connection with handkerchiefs gave her an uncomfortable feeling of impropriety.

She gave him a handkerchief, however, with a small gasp of disgust, and watched his doings with a faint, half-scornful interest.

"How particular you are!" she said; "I had no idea you could trouble yourself about such things."

"I can't stand dirt in man or beast."

"How did you stand travelling—in Algeria, for example?"

"Ah! there—there were compensations; the game was worth the candle; and if civilisation has produced nothing better—give the devil his due—it has produced clean skins and clean eating. I fancy I was originally

designed for an inspector of nuisances," he continued, running Gwen's lovely morsel of cambric on the end of a pointed stick in and out the handle of a cup.

Gwen noticed, with some wonder, the curiously delicate way in which he did it. "The thing would have smashed long ago in any other man's hand," she thought. "He treats women like that; he is very gentle, but he is the master; he holds them in his hand, and does as he likes with them. And I have no doubt whatever that there are at this minute hundreds of women who would like it. Why doesn't that handle break and cut him—there is no legal bond between them?" This struck her grim sense of humour, and she had to bite her lips to keep in a wild laugh.

"Yes, as a nuisance man I should have been a success," he went on, "whereas, as a British land-owner!" he gave an expressive shrug. "Gwen, how do you think you'll stand a flat clay country, overrun with woolly-brained squires, and their dames and daughters?"

It was a horrid thought. Gwen gave a swift little turn to put it away from her; her dress caught in a stretched canvas, put up face inwards against the wall, and brought it down with a muffled crash.

Strange came forward to help her put it up, and, with a hand of each of them on it, they paused suddenly and started, and with a quick turn of his hand Strange set it this time face outwards in its place, and looked into it with eager excitement, while Gwen's face grew cold and still, with a touch of sternness on it.

While they were looking, the door burst open, and

Brydon came in with the milk and a soft paper parcel—looking like cakes.

"Strange, how did you find it?" he cried. "I never meant you to see it. Lady Strange, it is only a sketch."

"I beg your pardon," she said; "my dress caught in it and knocked it down, and as we raised it we saw the face; then, I suppose, curiosity did the rest."

"When did you see my wife, Brydon?" said Strange, still absorbed in the picture.

"In church, the day she was married. I know I should have been in Paris, but I wanted to make this sketch. I want, when I know well enough how to do it," he said, turning to her humbly, "to make a picture of you, Lady Strange, and to give it to Strange, and this is just the idea for it."

"I am sure my husband must appreciate your kindness," she said half absently.

Perhaps she might have put a little more warmth into her voice if she had seen the fallen face of the boy as he turned to look to his kettle. She had, however, already more to occupy her than she wanted.

The sketch was a stroke of genius. It was a gracious, graceful girl, standing before the altar in her shimmering marriage robes, in actual flesh and blood, the great soul of the woman shining out from the violet eyes; the tender strength of the mouth, the resolute pose of the rounded chin, the russet gold of the hair—the whole lived and thought. One held one's breath to catch the regular soft rhythm of hers, the very hand held out for its ring was palpitating with life.

Naturally, the whole thing would have filled the soul of a dilettante with unutterable disgust, being as glar-

ingly full of faults of detail as it well could be ; but an artist with half an eye in his head would have put all these by in a place by themselves, to be dealt with later, and would have gone mad over the truth that remained.

It was the girl's figure alone that made the picture ; the man she stood before was a mere blur of an idea, as were all the surroundings.

Strange's eyes, as he watched the woman, were brimful of a terrible joy, and of a more terrible sadness.

As for Gwen, she fell to criticising the details in a way that made Brydon's flesh creep on his bones.

"This is not the original sketch," she said suddenly, stopping short in a sweeping criticism ; "I wish you would show us that."

"It is very bad ; you would like it still less than you do this."

"I might like it less as a picture, but, as a likeness, more, perhaps. Do show it to me."

The mere suspicion of entreaty she threw into her voice had never yet been rejected by any man, and soft-hearted Brydon was not going to be the first to run counter to her inclinations ; so altogether against his will he pulled the sketch, about half the size of the other one, out from among a number of others, and put it in a good light where she could examine it at her ease.

"Ah !" she said, "yes, that's me, myself ! What induced you to idealise ? It was unjust towards me and dishonest to yourself."

"It was neither ; it was prophetic," said Strange in a low voice only audible to her.

She glanced at him for a second with curling, scornful lips.

"Was it impossible, then, to make a decent picture of me as I look now?" she asked, with a laugh, turning to Brydon, who was blushing furiously and wishing he could swallow himself.

"No fellow living could do justice to you," he blurted out painfully, "however you may look; but I was trying to paint a bride, and there, in that first study, you didn't look just like one—from my own confounded fault, no doubt—so I tried the other."

"You have certainly succeeded in producing your bride," she remarked, with a curious, absent smile.

To give her her due, she did not know how cruel her own pain made her. Her husband did, however; he winced as he put the two sketches side by side to compare them. He had the delicate, sensitive respect of most strong men for feelings and other frail, nervous things of that sort.

Gwen came and stood beside her husband, and looked from one to the other of the sketches.

"Now in this first one," she said, "the girl looks as if she were pre-ordained to the *rôle* of bride; in this other one, as you observe, she does *not*, but she is me. I am so sorry to disillusion you of your idea."

"You have not," said Brydon softly; "only showed her many-sidedness."

"I can get my wedding-dress over," said Gwen, with a touch of malice about her mouth; "shall I, and give you a few sittings in the character of bride?"

"No thank you, Lady Strange," said the boy, with admirable coolness, "I shall stick to the ideal for my

picture, I will work hard on it. And when it is finished, will you have it, Strange?"

"Will I? The deuce I will! It would be a magnificent present without another stroke of work in it."

"What will you call it, Humphrey?" asked his wife.

"I shall call it 'The Incognita.'"

"Mr. Brydon, tea is getting cold all this time, and I am so thirsty," she said, with serene imperiousness, turning from the sketches and going over to the little table. "I hope you are as good at making tea as you are at making brides," she went on mockingly. "Sugar? Yes, please, two lumps, and—galette? How delicious! I do like French cake."

"Lady Strange, you said you would sit to me as a bride: did you mean it?"

"I did," she said amusedly.

The ungainly-looking boy with his great, saving clauses of eyes, and his queer, red blushes and open admiration of herself, gave her a sensation of interest.

"Would you sit just once in that dress—or any other you like? You don't know how good of you it would be."

"Is it such a boon then when I require such an amount of idealisation?"

"Lady Strange!" he murmured reproachfully, with ludicrous woe.

"Ah, well, then, I will sit for you—where?—here?"

"Oh, not here! Did you think I would have the cheek to ask you to climb these stairs to sit for me? Anywhere you arrange for me to come."

"Then come to our hotel; but I know my husband

intends to ask you to dine with us to-night, so we can then settle the time."

"Thank you more than awfully!" he cried, with most unaffected fervour, "it's such a boon for a fellow like me to get a lady; we can get more or less colour and lovely flesh, you know, to paint from in the cheap models, but then they are *grisette* to the very marrow. Besides, it is not safe with Legrun even to experiment on them. We must learn to draw before we go about libelling even models. He says, 'Poor devils, they have enough to put up with without that!' So you can see what an inestimable benefit you are bestowing on me. Strange, do you notice my walls? Not a rag to break the monotony."

"I do; I thought the sternness of Art had come on you prematurely."

"No, but Legrun did. I brought all the old rags from the old shop and renewed the stock here, and those four walls were one delicate glimmer of colour, when, as Satan himself arranged it, who should come shambling and blaspheming up the stairs one blessed Sabbath day but Legrun, who insists upon having our addresses. I thought he'd have a fit when he sat down gasping and glaring at the walls. 'My good lad,' he roared at last, 'how old are you?' 'Nineteen,' says I, shaking like a jelly fish. 'I thought you were nine,' he yelled, 'and making a doll's house; clean down that filth, clean it from the decent lime-washed walls that never injured you, and remember—remember, boy, that Art is serious, severe, stern, grave, terrible,' he shrieked, waving his arms like a maniac, and spitting horribly; 'it will stand no tricks, no mockings, *parbleu*! Rags!—Filth!—with the

disease chock-full in them! Gur! Guz! Hu! Never no more let me see such sights!' and he raged down the stairs into the street, spitting, and scraping his throat,—he lives in an awful funk of infection,—and so I had to strip off my rags and leave the walls to their native nakedness."

"You can have your revenge when you set up on your own account. Gwen, it is nearly six o'clock."

"Yes, we must go. We'll see you at dinner, Mr. Brydon?"

"Will you walk or drive, Gwen?"

"I will drive," she said, and there was a dull, tired tone in her voice.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GWEN was in an unusual humour this afternoon. She was silent until they got into the *fiacre*, but directly it moved she began to talk in a swift, even way peculiarly her own.

Everything she said had the calm, cold brilliancy of steel about it, and she advanced the most dangerously heterodox opinions in a most unimpassioned and frozen style.

Strange shrugged his shoulders with grim good humour as she went on. He admired her splendid insolence, as any man would have done ; all the same, he felt a half frantic longing for that picture-bride and an ever-increasing wonder as to how any woman cast in the same mould, eye for eye, mouth for mouth, dimple for dimple, curve for curve, could so atrociously belie her nature.

Suddenly Gwen veered round and turned the conversation into a personal and analytical channel. She had never done it before, except in her one brief allusion to the yellow aster.

"That boy of yours is a genius, Humphrey, your swan is no goose," said she ; "but, tell me, did I look in the very least like that woman the day you married me ?"

He looked at her face of fine scorn.

"Not in the least, except in the matter of form, and colour, and pose. These are you in tangible flesh and blood."

"What did you mean by your 'prophetic'?" she demanded, casting pink shadows over her face as she moved the red silk blind slowly to and fro.

"The possibility of your being as she is one day."

"Ah!"

The blind moved a little faster, and her hand held it tighter.

"I put it to you as a reasonable man—do you believe in that possibility?"

"As a reasonable man, I do," said he, watching the pink shadows playing in her dimples.

"Yes——? And how is this to come to pass?"

"Ah, there you have me!" he said; "I don't know—possibly God may, or the modern monster, Evolution."

"Through what processes, I should very much like to know?"

"So should I, but I don't, you see."

"She'd feel better if her face flushed like other women's," he thought; "it must be ghastly to have to consume all one's own smoke like that."

Gwen looked out of the window, laughing softly to herself.

"You look super-humanly cool," she said, "but this minute your pride is all agog to knead and mould me into that bridal creature. It would be a triumph of Art assuredly, and to your credit. I wish you might have the kudos of it—why can't you?—why can't I help you to, for the life of me?"

There came a rush of calm, restrained vehemence

into her cold tones that brought them to a sort of white heat. "Why am I not mouldable—or like other women?"

"My good child, you could hardly expect that from the daughter of your father and mother; you are unreasonable!"

"Yes, you are right, I had forgotten them," she said. "It is abominable we should be such puppets; not only present chances to play fast and loose with us, but to have to dance to the tune of old, ignorant, half-daft ones, that should go and rot in the grave of old failures! Why should they stay and torment us? We have enough of their kind to deal with on our own account. Have you ever read the Bible?"

"Have I ever read the Bible! Do I not know every inch of Syria, and every second inch of Egypt? Yes, I have read the Book, and on its native soil."

"Perhaps that may suit it, I don't think ours does. There was one thing, however, I read in it, that took hold of me; you may know it—'God's ways are past finding out.' This seems to me to contain a whole philosophy, capable of universal application, and reaching to the present time."

"You are going too fast, my good Gwen; isn't that rather the philosophy of ignorance? You are arguing from a point you rarely affect—from the point of view of Jewish theology with its strong, and primitive, and mystery-loving methods. God's ways, after all, if we choose to dig into them, are no denser, and are just on the same line as Nature's. She permits no cause without an effect, or she will very well know the reason why."

"I wasn't arguing from any point of view, Jewish

or otherwise ; I was just applying a theological axiom personally, thinking of parents and other chances."

"Ah, that's an idle subject, isn't it? By the way, you have a sneaking regard yourself for that bridal creature—you admire the woman, don't you?"

"Admire her! Yes, as a woman of course I do. Why, she is—superb! With that mature, strong tenderness in every line of her, and that divine protecting patient air of hers, that woman might be a mother of nations."

Strange started, his mouth twitched suddenly, and red and blue stars swam before his eyes. Gwen went on unheeding, in her passionless tones,—

"That woman is not, however, me. I am a beautiful girl—that, and no more; I contain nothing, I assure you, nothing that could be moulded into that woman."

"You contain everything," said her husband slowly, "only the deuce of the matter is, that none of us know where to find it!"

"No, nor ever will."

She leant forward so that her breath touched his cheek. "Humphrey, I wish you had never seen that picture! This necessity for idealisation is an insult to me, and to yourself; you should have had more insight from the beginning."

"My good child," he said, laughing softly, "I thought the experiment was an avowed fact."

She drew in her lips sharply, and was silent.

When she spoke again her voice was rather hoarse.

I have often tried to imagine the things that go to a murder," she said, "and I really do think I understand the impulse now. I shall never altogether hate

a murderer again. I am glad I know ; one feels better, more liberal, for every new sensation."

Strange laughed.

"And, after all, it was all supremely silly," she went on, "the experiment is two-sided, but you have no idea how infinitely brutal the bald fact sounded."

"Bald facts mostly do."

"Well, there is reason even in experiments, and remember, once for all, I am not a dramatic creature given to sudden new developments, I am no emporium for the creation of fresh sensations ; here I am, finished and complete."

Strange laughed.

"'Finished and complete !' Was ever conceit like unto hers ! My good girl, you are neither."

She threw up her head.

"Well, here I am then, unfinished and incomplete."

"Ah, but Nature invariably finishes her work if it's worth the tools."

"Just as Providence shapes our ends," she sneered with modulated savageness. "Ah, this marriage truly is an experiment ! Look at those two at the window—that girl, and that man, that stunted creature there ! Perhaps he's an artist. She has a measly look, and the man's nose is awful ! They are not a scrap like Browning's artist and the girl, and yet, I fancy, they think themselves in love with one another. Tell the man to stop for a minute !—here, here, at this house. There, do you see the idiotic simpers ? Ah, yes, that's love ! And the two will marry, no doubt, on next Shrove Tuesday, but it won't be an experiment. I don't think either of the pair looks as if he or she went in for observing new phases."

"They'll have enough to do to keep the wolf from the door. Perhaps in time, instead of observing new phases, they'll punch one another's heads if they must have fresh sensations."

"Is that the usual and orthodox end to being in love—punching the head physically or morally, according to the rank of the lovers?"

"No, the methods vary according to the quality of the love. Have you had enough, shall we drive on?"

She nodded.

"If it's worth its salt, of course there's no end."

"One even continuous stream into the ocean of—Nothingness! How appallingly trite and stale; nothing fresh, nothing new!"

"The state has a quite peculiar freshness and newness of its own, I am told, which is perennial—and here we are at the door."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GWEN dropped quite easily into the ways of her new home; she could generally adapt herself to mere physical conditions; her unnatural unrest and craving for excitement in the first few weeks of her married life were, of course, the symptoms of an abnormal mental condition.

So when she had to face the inevitable, and to stay her albatross flight, and betake herself to the domestic roost, she did it gracefully enough; and if her wings did strain and stretch themselves now and again till they often came near snapping, and would pull and tug at her as if they wanted to drag the heart out of her body, no one but herself—and one other, who guessed very near to the truth—was any the wiser.

But it was perhaps the unconfessed humdrumness of life when her flight had ceased, that set her off on her new track—that, and her sense of justice, which began to fret and peak in her again, now there was no longer constant outer stir and movement to shut thought's mouth.

The necessity to touch dogs that will sleep no longer is a hideous one, but it must be dealt with.

When Gwen found this necessity a real and absolute

one, and no imaginary demand that could be shelved, she faced it, and proceeded to thrash out the ground with an organised exhaustiveness that was almost brutal in its uncompromising frankness.

She had gone through it all, by bits, in a desultory way, several times since her home-coming. This was unsatisfactory; the matter must be laid out in its full bearings and fundamentally cleared up. But the time to do this was hard to find between callers and calling.

This afternoon she was quite idle, however. Humphrey was off attending a meeting in the neighbouring town, and it was snowing heavily.

"The most daring visitor must jib to-day," thought Gwen; "I shall claim it unreservedly, and I must have open air for this business."

Her maid naturally thought her mad; that mattered little. She was dressed and right out in the storm in ten minutes from the time she had taken her resolution.

An old hound of Strange's that had taken to her from the first was as much scandalised as the maid, but he was not the one to be outdone by any slip of a girl. He gathered up his great legs, shook himself with a drowsy grunt, and followed her with a half-contemptuous curiosity.

The Park had a certain beauty of its own; it was big, and if its undulations were insignificant, their curves were soft and full, and the timber was magnificent and well-placed; the whole looked well under snow. The great dull red-brick house stood out in fine contrast to the dazzling white of the earth and the glittering green of the clump of pines that flanked its left wing, and from which the fierce wind kept stripping

the snow wreaths that tried hard to nestle in the shelter of the cosy branches.

When Gwen got beyond the terraces to a turn in the drive, she could see the sluggish stream that ran through a mile or so of the Park, turned into a torrent, rushing and foaming onward in its brilliant course.

She stopped in the very teeth of the storm, and looked round her with a radiant face.

"The whole place is transformed!" she thought. "It generally reminds me of a great, soft, white cow, chewing the cud knee-deep in water in the shade of a full, silky beech—it has all that beast's ample, contented, intolerably depressing beauty; but to-day it is grand, glorious, like anything but a cow. The heart of it is alive and throbbing under that driving storm; it is the birth of passion in that suave, smooth, green sod, and the snow is the christening robe. Oh, I wish it were always like this!"

She threw off her veil and turned round, that the blast might strike every part of her.

"It's magnificent!" she shouted in her excitement, "and—after all, passion's a wonderful thing!"

She laughed as she bent to the blast. "But it's amazing the way it subsides without leaving a token of its presence. What's a broken bough or two as a witness to these wonders? In two days, in less, this place will be as uncompromisingly smooth and smug as ever. Ah, passion is a fraud then, or else it requires explanation!"

She hurried on to the little ivy-covered bridge that spanned the stream, and looked down into the roaring, seething waters with laughing, parted lips.

She wanted to stay; the hurrying foaming mass of

unrest had a fascination for her; but she dragged herself from it, and turned off from the drive on to a narrow path that led to a sheltered, wooded glade about half a mile from the gates.

"I see the deer and the sheep have taken refuge there!" she said to herself. "I suppose the fury of the storm goes over their heads. I can think of nothing I ought to here, I shall follow the deer. Bran, what do you mean to do?"

She pointed significantly to the antlers peeping through the snow-laden branches. The hound gave a solemn nod. Seemingly he understood her; at any rate he kept by her side and refrained from sport for that afternoon.

When she got to the trees she looked round for a seat.

The snow on the ground was too soft for sitting purposes, even for her reckless strength to venture on, but she found at last safe anchorage on a broad, wooden fence that skirted the grove; then she turned all her senses in on herself.

She fixed her eyes advisedly on a peaceful group of sheep, cuddled together on the lee-side of an old beech, as being less disturbing to the mind than the tossing antlers of the deer, and then she fell to meditation.

"To begin with," she said, "I am married. That is the one solid fact to argue from. Into the bargain I was, I believe, sane when I committed the deed which is beyond recall, even on the plea of insanity—that idea struck me once in the early days with tremendous force. I must then give up crying over spilt milk; it is a degrading pursuit, and offers no loophole of escape; I must just face the future—ah, my

dear, that wrings your withers, does it?" she muttered, as a cold shiver ran down her spine.

"Humphrey and I are playing at cross-purposes now; that must be put a stop to. Well, perhaps it is as well to leave that to time, which will do the business for him quite effectually. Ah, that picture! That has deluded the man; he has hampered himself with two wives—the sooner he returns to monogamy the better for himself. This," she said, touching her breast, "this is as nothing to that other! Men might fall down before her and call her blessed; they fall down before me, sure enough, but they don't call me blessed—quite the contrary!—even Humphrey can't go the length of that; but fancy him before that other! I wish I had never looked at her, I shall get to hate her yet; she confuses me, she complicates matters in the most annoying way! Pah! I never intended to dissect her to-day; why can't I keep to myself?—me—who belongs body and soul—soul!"

She looked down on herself with curling lips. "Soul! Well, any soul I have and *all* my body belong to Humphrey Strange as sure as any horse in his stable does. And he calls this thing wife, and loves it—loves it, bless you! and in a most astonishing way. Then this wife: she honours Humphrey Strange, she obeys him,—I have never gone contrary to him in one solitary thing, and I never will—that is vulgar. But as for love! I don't love the man; I see every good point in him; he dominates me in a way that is simply horrible; but love him! Why, every day it seems less possible to do it, yet it seems that one's first and paramount duty in this amazing contract is to love—and now I have got to face this duty. How,

I wonder? Am I to set diligently to fall in love with this husband of mine, and how? And how?" she cried, with a short, hard laugh.

Then she stopped thinking, and looked out on the whitened earth, and the sheep huddled together still closer under a sudden sharp side blast that whisked round their shelter and set the branches above them sighing and moaning.

The sun had sunk further into the west and had carried its glow away, and the snow had lost its glitter. Gwen shivered.

"It chokes one to think of it!" she said. Pulling her hands out of her muff, and taking off her hat, she turned her face to the blast, and let it beat her at its savage will.

"Oh, my hair—how heavy it is!" she muttered, and began pulling out the hairpins until the whole heavy mass fell about her and was caught by the wind, which shrieked with delight at its prize. "Ah, that's better! Well—now, this duty! After all, it's only sheer justice. I must, must, must face it! If only an earthquake would come into our lives, if I were dying or Humphrey mortally wounded, or if some catastrophe could fall on us, in the general shock and upheaval something might snap in me, some undiscovered spring might burst up, and I might feel as duty demands! But in this everyday existence, in this flat country, among the flatter squires and squiressees, nothing ever happens, no one dies, no one gets a mortal wound, there is never a sign of an earthquake of any description, and yet this duty stands out as clear and as aggressive as ever."

A strand of her long hair got caught in a nail in

the fence, she lingered over the disentangling of it, then she turned to Bran and had a little talk with him, but the patient love in his eyes vexed her.

"Go!" she said, giving him a little shove with her foot, "go! You look like that other woman! Oh, this duty, this duty! Well, I will make one solitary conscientious try at it, I will begin this very day!"

She drew a long breath.

"Touches and caresses and things of that sort bring thrills, and shakes, and trembles, and flushes,—every female novelist assures one of that fact. Well, I must practise touches and such, and hope for results; also, I must not let myself shiver and feel sick when I in my turn get them bestowed upon me. I wish to goodness I had thought of all this before; it would have been far easier to have begun right from the first."

She suddenly hid her face in her muff.

"How awful that was, how awful! oh!"

She began to drum her feet with some slight violence on the lower rail of the fence, and she beat her hands together—"to keep them warm," she assured herself.

"That picture person must be put down, and this, this," she whispered, taking her face, with a sudden soft pathos, between her hands, "this must be brought forward, made inevitable, so to speak; then, then, perhaps, with time and custom the other will be allowed to rest, and—rot!" she cried sharply, lifting her face and turning it again to the blast. "Ugh! how vulgar I am, that painted creature demoralises me altogether! Ah, here comes Humphrey, walking and leading his horse; I will call him, and launch out on my duty. Look at him, it's a wonder I can say, 'No,' to that

'pulse's magnificent come and go!' I can though, it doesn't move me the eighth of an inch."

She stood up on the fence and waved her handkerchief to him.

"Now, enter duty, exit vague speculation!" she cried, with a laugh, as she jumped off the fence.

CHAPTER XXIX.

STRANGE's horse had stood on a sharp stump hidden by the snow, and had lamed himself, and they were both making the best of their way to the house. It was bad going, the fluttering snow kept constantly balling in Lorraine's hoofs. Any attempt at hurry was out of the question; so Strange's thoughts turned, as they always did in any unhurried moment, on his wife, and the puzzle they were both dissecting.

"There is one thing," he said, with a laugh, "we are not likely to pall on one another in a hurry; there is nothing in the least mawkish in our relations, and we are both of us good-humoured. That half-amused malice in her radiant face, whenever she catches me watching her!—Was there ever before such radiance in any woman's face? This wife of mine is superb, and yet I haven't an atom of claim to her, except from the law's brutal point of view. But the mistake was mine, I thought it was in all women to be taught to love, given a decent education, but it seems there are some who want a special dispensation to get it driven into them. What a mystery the whole thing is! And you try to do your duty, my poor little girl, groping blindly in the cold outer air of ignorance, and you think

I know nothing of your unrest and your wild endeavours ! How little you know, after all, with all your big brain ! Hallo, there you are—yourself, on the top of the fence, with your hair flying ! What hair it is ! If you were any one else,” he shouted, “I should see visions of colds and swollen noses ; you can laugh and dare anything. Have you been long out ?”

She came up panting.

“Since two o’clock. I had no idea I could be moved to enthusiasm for this part of the world. But this storm has rummaged out every latent spark in me. Look at those pines fighting the wind ! Oh, oh, my hat !”

“Hold Lorraine, I’ll catch it.”

Gwen laughed gaily as she watched the chase. At first it was even betting between the two, but in the end Strange brought it back in triumph.

“You can’t catch cold, but don’t you think the dignity of your position in the county demands a hat ?”

“If it wants a hat as disreputable as this to prop itself up with, it can’t be up to much ! By the way, what a united couple the servants will think us, what a striking picture of easy affection !”

Strange laughed, but his wife could have bitten out her tongue. After getting nearly frozen to the fence, in her zeal to map out her duty, this to be the outcome of it all !

She began to speak quickly, and her voice had a curious new little note in it that interested her husband, and made him turn his eyes on her more than once. But she was talking too fast to notice him, and she had the wind to fight. Besides all this, wild ideas of touches and such like began to float about her brain in rather a fiantic way.

She brought herself to reason with a shake; fortunately, perhaps, the time being hardly fitting to launch out on any new line.

When Gwen was coming down to tea in a wonderful gown of white velvet with slashes of crocus yellow, she met Tolly, now the valet's young man, carrying off an armful of Strange's wet clothes. By some sudden impulse she stopped and accosted him.

"I hope you will be happy here," she said—if the truth must be told, in rather a shy way, the experience was so new and shocking.

"You must try to keep away from gin," she added sagely, "and then you will be sure to get on well. I know your master wants you to."

Tolly gave a wild dab at his red mat of stubble, muttered inarticulately, and fled.

"Oh, what made me do it, what? That horror will haunt me for a week. What is Humphrey made of that he can endure the constant sight of him? And, now I remember, Mrs. Fellowes told me one day he nursed that awful thing for three weeks once, because it whimpered at the thought of a hospital. Imagine that mouth, that nose, that ghastly whole, in delirium! Oh! Imagine the mere touch of those flabby paws, with their great red knobs—those knobs fascinated me, and, ugh! they have got into my eyes! Without doubt, I have a remarkable man for a husband! I wish, oh, I wish I had my tea, I am dying for it; I think I must be tired."

She sank down into a big chair, and put her feet out to catch the heat; then she put her hands up and set to to rub her eyes, in a foolish, futile effort to clear

her whirling brain, and then Strange and the tea came in.

"I have seen Tolly," she said, giving him some tea.

"In that gown?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that's good; it may awaken some sense of religion in the beggar. I have experimented on him with every variety of church, and with a most mixed assortment of parsons, without the slightest effect; but there is a certain divinity about you in that gown that may appeal to the fellow—be the thin edge of the wedge, and lead to higher things. It would be a new *rôle* for you to pose in, Gwen, as an instrument of grace."

"I think I should do better as an instrument of wrath," she said, with rather a strained smile; she felt a sudden impulse of loathing against what Strange called her "divinity."

"It is one of the things which keep me so remote, so absolutely aloof," she thought hurriedly. "What do women want with divinity or any other super-human attribute? I believe Rossetti must have thought of me for his 'Lilith.'"

She stood up half absently, and looked into a mirror near at hand, then she moved away suddenly, with sneering lips and a quick flush.

"That's not the fire!" her husband thought. "Oh, Lord, what's up now?"

After a few minutes she went slowly over to the piano, and began to play in a vague, fitful way. Her husband dropped the paper he had taken up, and listened. It struck him that her playing had altered,—it used to be mechanical and rather expressionless; no

one could accuse it of want of expression to-night, even if the expression did limit itself to anger and unrest.

After a time she stopped playing, with one dissatisfied, disordered chord; then there was a little pause, which she broke by singing, first softly and half humming; then she seemed to awaken with a start, and she sang on, song after song, with a sort of excited vehemence. Her voice was a low contralto, there was not a sharp nor a hard tone in it, but there were some strong, harsh ones, like the groans of men, and some deep, guttural ones, like the sighs of women. There was no passion in her voice, but it was full of consuming, soft tumults, of vague, sad unrest.

"This is rather a pleasanter modification of her first storms!" thought Strange. "What possibilities there are in that voice. I wonder what would happen if I went over and tried to kiss that dead woman into life! Pygmalion's task was a fool to mine. What's marble to an undeveloped woman!"

He stood behind her and joined in with her song, his bass to her contralto. The combination gave one rather a shock at first, but it grew fascinating as they went on.

Gwen stopped suddenly in the middle of a song.

"I could not have believed our two voices could ever mix and make completeness."

"It is a 'sport.'"

"I like explicable things best," she said, peering out into the semi-gloom.

"You go about with a scalpel in your brain, Gwen! What a thing it is to come of scientific stock!"

"Oh, it's a diabolical thing for a woman!" said Gwen.

She shut the piano up softly—she never by any chance banged things—and went upstairs to dress.

"I shall wear that silk that looks like flesh," she said.

"I put it away, your ladyship; you said you did not like it."

"If you could get at it quite easily, I should like to wear it to-night."

"That dress suggests good sound flesh and blood, with no remote divinity about it," she thought. "Oh, I wish I could let things be, and stop poking about among mysteries. I will touch him to-night, yes, I will. I wonder—I wonder—if I can possibly muster up strength for a kiss."

CHAPTER XXX.

MRS. FELLOWES, meanwhile, was having a most unsatisfactory time with the Park people ; it seemed absolutely impossible to dig into them or to be of any service to them. They were wearing her to skin and bone, and she was meditating a change somewhere or other ; when, one day, crossing the hall after lunch, she heard a knock at the door and opened it herself.

She found Mr. and Mrs. Waring standing in their normal attitude, and looking frightfully embarrassed ; she saw at a glance that they looked queerer than usual, and not feeling equal just at that minute to face them alone, she carried them straight off to the dining-room.

"Ah, the *Nineteenth Century*, I perceive," said Mr. Waring, as soon as he found himself in a chair, with his hat grasped in one hand and the other on the edge of his knee, with the fingers stretched out, and feeling nervously in a baulked way.

"In that last article of St. George Mivart's," continued Mr. Waring, "we find a marked evidence of the deteriorating effect of any special bias on a man's mind. If this man were not an ardent churchman of the Romish persuasion, I have always thought he might have done well in literary science, but as it is—it seems to me he has so much confused the thread of his

discourse as to render it comparatively valueless by weaving into it, with most conscientious persistence, stray fragments of the deductions he has drawn from his own crude creed. This demands, on the reader's part, a searching, sifting process, which the intrinsic value of the gentleman's articles to my mind hardly warrants."

"Ah, you like your science neat," said the Rector; "so possibly might I, if I had time to collect my own facts."

"Ah, but for work that must last, time and an undivided mind are necessities, no matter what the cause may be that clouds the brain."

He looked at his wife, and his floating, near-sighted eyes grew dim with tender pain, and the tendril-like movement of his fingers increased.

He forgot St. George Mivart, and all at once it occurred to him why he had come.

"Poor old boy, his punishment is horribly out of proportion to his deserts," thought the Rector, as, in the pause that followed, he caught snatches of the low-toned talk of the women, with Gwen's name entering largely into it, and saw Mrs. Waring's face fixed on his own wife with pathetic, shy yearning, not veering round to her husband with covert eagerness, as it used to do.

Mr. Fellowes caught himself echoing the other husband's sigh, and he laughed, as the absurdity of the situation struck him.

"This must be stopped," he thought; "it grows mawkish. I wonder if they have forgotten to feed—more than likely. Ruth, have you asked Mrs. Waring if she has lunched?"

"Indeed I haven't!" she cried. "I don't know what I can have been thinking about."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Fellowes," stammered the little woman; then her eyes turned towards their magnet.

Mr. Waring was at her side, and with her hand in his, with a speed that made Mrs. Fellowes gasp.

"The fact is, Mrs. Fellowes," he explained heroically, "we were both a little forgetful; we—we——" he paused painfully and gulped. "Ah!—I——"

He repented the word sadly; it was the first time his conscience had forced him to separate the two, and it hurt him. "Yes, I was much absorbed in my work—and my wife, I think, is not very well."

"I am quite well, dear," she murmured.

"Ah, dearest, I doubt it. I thought some quinine might be beneficial, Mrs. Fellowes. In fact, that was the primary motive of our call."

"Give her some claret for the present, and make her eat something: wine and meat are as good as quinine any day."

Mrs. Waring was the most docile creature breathing, she swallowed obediently everything set before her; when suddenly a little tremble ran all down her and shook her gently, and she let her fork drop with a little clash.

She had caught sight just over the sideboard of one of Brydon's sketches of Gwen, which she had sent Mrs. Fellowes.

Her husband had not seen the picture, so he only pressed her knife hand gently, and murmured "Nerves!"

She went back obediently to her meal; and if they had given her the whole of a chicken and a quart of

claret she would have swallowed both without a murmur, so long as they let her get finished, and go close up to that picture.

Mr. Waring's meal, on the contrary, was very interesting to him, and he enjoyed it with a zest that set him playing at a quite new and charming departure in classification. A graceful, pretty house-mother, moving on the field of his vision, and supplying every unspoken want of his, was a pleasing variation.

"A charming type, this serving woman," he reflected, regarding her with gentle favour, "charming. By no means a unique or even an unusual one, but really quite charming and pleasant to observe. In that woman the maternal instinct will be found in a very advanced state of development; and yet, if I recollect aright ——" He started, frowning, and pausing, as, with a morsel of meat on his fork, he contemplated her curiously. "Yes, I believe my recollections are accurate; she has never had any children, and probably, after this lapse of time, will not produce any. Very strange indeed, very strange, another of those most puzzling instances of Nature's waste."

He sighed, and reflected a little on Mrs. Fellowes as she helped his wife to cream; then he went rather sadly to his tart, feeling a slight tinge of contempt for Nature's inconsistency.

When Mrs. Waring had consumed as much nourishment as her entertainers thought fit for her, Mr. Fellowes went over to the sideboard, unhooked the sketch, and propped it against the claret jug.

"The colouring is good, isn't it?" he said. "Gwen sent it to us last week."

Mrs. Waring threw up her head and looked at the

Rector's wife; then her face flooded with pink, and there came a pain into her heart that she had never felt before. For the first time in her nine-and-thirty years this little woman was jealous.

"Gwen gave it!" she repeated. "Henry, do you think Gwen would give us one?"

There was a perceptible choke in her voice, and she put up her little hand to her throat with a swift movement.

"My love!" he said, in a rather frightened way, "we could hardly ask our daughter for such a very valuable present."

"I suppose we could not," she said, with sweet humility.

"My reasonable, my docile one!" he thought, with tender satisfaction, "better a thousand times than any other female type, serving or otherwise."

He might have felt more disturbed if he had had the merest ghost of a notion as to the causes of her humility, which had less to do with him than he would altogether have relished. With all this congestion of novel emotion the woman was losing her pristine transparency.

"What are your plans for the afternoon?" asked the Rector. "You know that even the ordinary decencies of civilisation have to be shunted in a parson's life; I must be off in five minutes. Are you on for a walk, Waring?"

"I!—Oh, thank you, but we—I—we——" he caught nervously on to his wife's eyes, "we—we are very much engaged just now. We just called concerning this matter of quinine, and we have already absorbed too much of your time; untimely visitors

are a keen trial—my wife and I have suffered much from this form of affliction.”

The Rector laughed.

“Visitors are a brutal bane, ninety per cent. of them, but you two are most marked exceptions. We can, at any rate, go as far as the Park, for that is on my way, and I know my wife has designs on yours—you won’t get her back much before dinner-time.”

Mr. Waring turned round with a start.

“Is this the case?” he asked blankly.

“I would like to stay,” said Mrs. Waring softly; but she hung her head and did not look at her husband.

He looked at her, however, and his brows lifted themselves. He turned with solemnity to Mrs. Fellowes.

“Pray consider this question of quinine,” he said, “and let us know the result—our experience is quite insufficient to go on.”

“You are quite welcome to all mine,” said Mrs. Fellowes, laughing.

He turned to his wife again. “Good-bye, my love. I hope I shall be able to get on with my work, but—ahem—this upsets one sadly.”

Mrs. Fellowes went to her husband in the hall just then, and they were alone.

“This is quite unusual, love—are you wise to remain?” he said.

Mrs. Waring’s eyes wandered to Gwen’s picture.

“I would like to stay,” she said, then suddenly she bent towards him, and the pink deepened on her cheeks, “but I will go if you like.”

“I wish you to do just as you like yourself, love.”

He loosed his hand gently from her clasp, and followed Mrs. Fellowes into the hall, his fingers twitching.

In an instant she was after him, and making for her hat, when Mrs. Fellowes caught her.

"Come to the door and see them off," she remarked innocently, drawing Mrs. Waring's arm through her own.

When she had seen them off the premises, Mrs. Fellowes shut her guest up with the picture and went to dress, then she scurried her off to the village, where they spent a rather remarkable two hours.

Mrs. Fellowes' companion was first discovered by an urchin who was making mud pies in a gutter. At the first shock of his find he gave a whoop, and turned a somersault back into the dust, then he uplifted himself and fled with the news, despatching scouts to right and left on his progress.

When the ladies reached the village they found it all agog, every door was full of faces, and the howls of scrubbed infancy arose from every yard.

Mrs. Waring looked shy and twitched a good deal, but on the whole she bore herself gallantly.

The mothers embarrassed her, they seemed to expect conversation, and this was even the case with the children; she could just smile at them, however, and be silent. It was among the babies she shone; not, indeed, in her mode of holding them—she did that with her fingers, delicately, as if they had been pens—but she got so eager over them, so full of interest, asked so many anxious questions as to their appetites, and gave such amazing hints concerning their management, that she made an impression on the village such as astonished the oldest inhabitant, and set the women's

tongues wagging at a rate to surprise even their husbands.

It was an event, an epoch-making day in the village of Waring, when the squire's wife stepped in bodily presence in and out of its houses, and disseminated useful knowledge concerning the human infant.

When Gwen heard of it, in the same letter that told her to send her mother a sketch of herself without delay, she laughed sarcastically.

"This is dishonest of Mrs. Fellowes!" she cried, with a little stamp; "how dare she make all this fresh phase of lunacy into a pathetic story? There is a ring of false sentiment throughout the whole business."

CHAPTER XXXI.

GWEN lost no time in conducting her projected series of experiments; she carried them on conscientiously, and with an assumption of spontaneity that gave her husband a high opinion of her powers of self-government. As for the results on Gwen herself, she found them nil, she failed in experiencing one thrill or the ghost of a tremor.

She had an opportunity about this time of judging of the effects on the situation of a sudden danger to her husband. They had driven into the station to meet a parcel of books from London. They were early, and employed their time in watching the goings-on of an imp in human form wrestling with its nurse at one end of the platform.

"What an inestimable blessing it would be," said Humphrey reflectively, "if the Lord would be pleased to remove that creature. Look at it, biting and screaming like a horse!"

"Mr. Drew says the child is half idiotic."

"If it's not, the nurse soon will be. Phew—take the reins!"

She only knew she had them in a bundle in her hands, and Humphrey was off; then there struck on

her ear a crash of sound, and through it one thin, high shriek, and a long wailing.

For a second her eyes floated in darkness, then the express thundered on and she could see a confused mass of men and women bending down over something.

"That distinct, definite shriek was awful!" Gwen found herself thinking, with curious composure, though she knew perfectly well that her husband had very likely lost his life to save that of a congenital idiot.

He was only stunned, however, and the infant had got off scot-free.

When he came to her, Gwen was very white, in sheer disgust at her own want of emotion, and Strange knew as distinctly as if she had told him the cause of her pallor.

He would not wait for the books, but turned the horses' heads homewards and set off at a smart trot.

"That amiable infant," he said, when they had cleared the village, "it seems, felt itself moved to commit suicide in order to spite its nurse; it has been a long-standing threat, the woman says. It threw itself on its stomach before the in-coming train. By Jove! it was a close shave; we only got off by the skin of our teeth!"

She would have liked to touch him, to let her eyes melt in his sight, to make her lips tremble, but she could not for the life of her. She knew he had acted like a hero, but, as she had known before, he couldn't do any other thing when the call came; it did not seem in any way to alter matters.

Then she began to speculate as to what would have happened if perchance he had *not* come off by the

skin of his teeth. She looked curiously at him and wondered.

"I haven't a notion," she concluded at last, and she was silent for a long time and very pale.

"Was the game worth the candle?" she asked, as they went through the terrace gates. "You had said a minute before, the Lord would do well to remove the child."

"Probably not; but when a man happens to be in a desperate hurry he can't stop to go all round a question. I must go to the stables myself, there is something wrong with Boccaccio's off hoof. Shall I help you up the steps—you look white?"

"No, thank you—I wish—I wish——" she said slowly; she never finished her sentence, but went wearily into the house without turning her head.

"I wish to Heaven I knew what he thinks of it all—how much he minds!" she whispered to herself, with noiseless passion, as soon as she got into her room.

"Even in this dead-level life a big thing has come and gone, and has left me precisely as it found me."

She smote her hands together sharply, then she rang for her maid; she dared not be alone, her control over herself was on its last legs.

If she had looked into Strange's den half an hour later she might have got some idea of how much he minded, but he ate a good dinner, and afterwards tied flies with a steady hand, and made several quite decent jokes as he watched her standing at the open window, looking with careless interest at his work.

She wore a Watteau gown of pale primrose, with purple pansies scattered here and there over it; she

held a great yellow fan in her hand, and stood bathed in the yellow twilight.

"If I boxed her ears," he thought, "I wonder what she would do or say? Anyway, it couldn't hurt her more than those devilish experiments of hers hurt me. I have a good mind to try—if her ears weren't altogether so perfect I swear I would. Ah, my good girl, you are playing with fire!"

He paused to fix a wren's tail feather in its place.

"There may come a time, little fool, when I may get tired of this game, and resort to active measures, and then you'll find your bit of hell,—

"*Dann willst du weine, du liebe kleine!*"

In a moment of abstraction he sang it aloud, and gave Gwen a considerable start.

"Do you ever sew, Gwen?"

"No, but I can, I believe, in a fashion."

"I wish you would then, it might make you look a bit human."

"Good gracious! I am not divine again, am I? I thought I had shut all that away with my white tea-gown. Perhaps you would like to call Tolly?"

"Oh dear, no! You would not conduce to his soul's salvation in the least. On the contrary, I was thinking you had a marked resemblance to Lilith."

"Oh, Lilith! I am flattered certainly. I think I will go and get some work."

Strange laughed, and went on tying feathers on hooks.

"Ha, that touched her up!" he muttered.

When she was half up the stairs she stopped and stamped.

"How dare he say—say with a laugh what I won't even dare to think!"

However, she was soon back again in her yellow twilight, but sitting this time, and with a big bundle of coarse flannel in her hand that she began to sew with demure diligence.

"What in the name of fortune is that!" said Strange, after taking steady stock of it.

"I don't really know, I got it in Eliza's room—I think it is a jelly-bag, it's just like one I once made for Mrs. Fellowes, and spoiled disgracefully. I sewed up the wrong end!"

Strange investigated it with much interest.

"My good girl," he said, at last, "do you know what you are doing? You are sewing an old woman's petticoat."

He gave a laugh that reached Tolly as he sat varnishing boots downstairs.

"Bless 'em, the pair of 'em," he remarked, "and as 'appy together as if they lived in four rooms! Queer, too! as the aristocracy's mostly gone to the dogs in the domestic line!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I WONDER whether the fellow is grasping the 'high seriousness' of Art, or going to the devil!"

Strange was on his road to see Brydon, from whom that morning he had received a rather enigmatical note.

"I didn't expect you this hour," said Brydon, when he arrived, "I thought it was that brute, the fellow over me, who always forgets his key. I came back to the old place, you see, from a sort of habit, and I thought, too, it would suit Mag and Con. I went to see them. They taught me a lot, those two girls; they had fine flesh tints, better than the French article as a rule."

"Have they been to see you?"

"Yes, Mag's married, and her figure!—throw your coat there—it's a sin to see it; women of that order should die young."

"And Connie?"

"Connie! she's grown frowsy, I'm afraid it's gin! There was a blackguard she 'walked with' who levanted with a cook, so it's censorious to grudge her a drop of comfort. But to think of those pearly tints grown frowsy!" he murmured, "to sell that colouring for a greasy mess of pottage! The folly of man is

inscrutable !—Strange, you want desert air, your skin has lost tone !”

“Season, my good boy ; what else can you expect ?”

“I wonder if it’s all season,” thought the fellow, and an unaccountable coldness ran down his spine. “I wonder if he’s made a mistake too !”

“How are you getting on, as to work ?”

“I have to speak of something else first, and, for reasons best known to myself, I prefer fresh air for it—will you stroll round ?”

“I should like to see the picture first,” said Strange.

One of his old blushes mounted to Brydon’s cheeks.

“Wait till afterwards, if you don’t mind,” he said.

“Look at the light from that gin-palace on the red head of that child !” he went on, as they turned the corner, “it’s funny what glorious effects one gets from the filthiest combinations ! There is no light more bewildering and lovely than the phosphoric blue flicker from a graveyard.

“That effect now, those reeking gin lights on that dirty head, and the corpse lights are like a lot of writers’ work, no one can pass it by, it has a power to grasp and hold you that cleaner things don’t have, and such power means genius, don’t you think ? Power strong enough, I mean, to stoop a fellow’s mind and nose low enough to batten on corruption. If the corruption wasn’t made worth examining, one would only pass on, with a kick at the seething mass. Instead of that, a fellow looks and spits, and looks and spits again, but keeps looking, and then he gets enervated and unmanned before he knows what he is about. He sees the pitiless truth of things, of course, but he loses everything else—the result is very limiting when one

thinks of it. Battening on certain books," went on Brydon after a pause, "was the beginning of it, I think, then rottenness smells sweet after a time, and a fellow gets curious and wants to exploit on his own account. I did all sorts of things first; I tried trees, sun, shade, moonlight; I walked blisters on my feet; I worked in the sweat of my brow; but nothing would still the brutal throbbing, and I went mad one day in that maddening city. Art wasn't worth a straw to save me. I made a beast of myself, the cheap sort of beast that I had funds for, and—here is the result!"

"Well, you're a sorry object, it must be confessed!"

"But that's not the worst either—do you know I have altogether lost the way to work; I can do nothing. Now some fellows can go down in the gutter one day and mount up amongst the gods the next without turning a hair; it beats me."

"It's a good deal a question of nationality," said Strange; "Englishmen, as a rule, can't do complete work while they're mudlarking; French fellows often can; just as no decent bourgeois John Bull has it in him to write tons of magnificent filth on a sort of principle. The fact is, no fellow of your temperament has any business to wallow in modern French realism, you haven't tone enough. I felt certain this would happen, but you had to take your chance with your betters, and no doubt the experience hasn't been all loss. I am sorry for you all the same; you'll find your repentance a vast deal bitterer than the delirium was sweet. That is my experience anyway, and it will go harder with you; your health, you see, can't stand it."

"It can't, which makes me the bigger fool. To

think of my work being knocked on the head, and to so little purpose! Especially," he added naively, "when one has to do that sort of thing on the cheap."

"Fellows like you feel that sort of thing always, even if they have a pocket full of coin. You see, you are too fastidious and sensitive to enjoy vice properly; and yet the queer thing is, it debases you sooner than it does men of coarser make, unless it kills you right off the reel, as it mostly does. Stronger men have things to keep them up, you fellows haven't; they get brutalised if you like, but it is the brutalisation of men, not of women."

Here Brydon winced, possibly Strange saw him. He took no notice, however, but went on coolly,—

"They don't get rotten-soft and corrupt. Another thing that's against you,—your father's a parson, and his father before him, and your mother is a parson's daughter."

"Yes—what on earth has that to do with it?"

"A lot. With inherited conscience and spiritual feelings, and a sneaking regard for hell fire in every drop of your blood, things were sure to be made pretty hot for you in next to no time. Small wonder your work went to the devil!"

"I suppose it's all the brutal truth," said Brydon.

"Did you expect this?" he asked, with sudden shyness. "Are you disappointed?"

"I am too old ever to be disappointed in any fellow; probably there's not a thing you have done I wouldn't myself have done had I been in your skin. Now the question is, what's to fit you for work again?"

"I think," said the boy dolefully, "the best thing I could do would be to cut my throat."

"If I felt like an ass I should hold my tongue about it, and take a blue pill. By the way, there's some contradiction, for Blunt saw Legrun the other day, and he's tremendously pleased with you."

"Oh, I took to swatting for a time, as a sop to Cerberus, and worked like the very devil at drawing; but somehow I'd rather get a kick any day than praise when I know my work's dishonest, done to cover filth; it's an insult to Art."

"My good boy, don't be morbid! It was a good deal better to bring your lines into order than to do nothing."

"All the same, I have no satisfaction in any work done then."

"Ah, parson's blood again—no need you should; but you needn't add it to the list of your sins, that would be rather a work of supererogation, wouldn't it?"

"I would like to go out into the desert alone for forty days or so, and wrestle with anything that came along, God or the devil."

"A very proper attitude of mind and befitting your breed. In the meantime, when do you intend returning to Paris?"

"I must go to-morrow."

"Why must you?"

"Because——" he hesitated, blushing furiously.

"Good Heavens, man, speak out! Have we been friends for fifteen years for nothing?"

"Well, beastliness, however cheap you do it, is costly. Even your magnificent commission has gone down the gutter."

"It wouldn't pay either of us for you to return there

just now ; besides, I want you to come over and stay at my house."

"I cannot stay in the house with Lady Strange," said Brydon in a low voice, "I couldn't. If I am not clean enough to work at my Art I am certainly not fit to eat and drink in her presence. I didn't stay in my father's house until my mother and sisters had gone away, and—Lady Strange, somehow, is divine to me. She is always the bride in that picture. I think," he continued, with a strange softness in his voice, "for all her jeering at me, that I have painted the real woman."

It was Strange's turn to wince this time.

"Look here, Strange," the boy went on, still softly and with lowered head, "I finished that picture before I went into the sty. I wouldn't have touched her with a dirty brush."

"My dear fellow, I know it! I should have liked you to have stayed with us. At any rate, you will stay in London for a few days ; I will be your banker, of course ; it will be, after all, only a very trifling increase of your debt to me, and there's plenty of time to pay that in."

He took hold of the fellow's arm and swung him round.

"It's getting late," he said, "and I want to see the picture to-night."

They walked on in silence ; the boy's chivalrous adoration of his wife touched Strange sharply. All the same, he felt vastly inclined to turn round and punch his head for it.

"How dared the fellow go speculating on her possibilities!" he thought ; "that is my business."

"Yet when one comes to think of it, I'm an ass; I might just as well go for the dozens of others whose admiration is quite as vicarious. It's not Gwen one of the lot goes mad over, it's her double. Heigh ho! Bigamy's an awful embarrassment."

"I tried to keep exactly to Nature in that last picture of Lady Strange," said Brydon, as he set to unfastening the packing of his picture.

"You succeeded," said Strange. Brydon looked round.

"You didn't like it then—no more did I, I tried too hard to be faithful to the order."

"Well, and so you were, and that was what was wanted of you. Mrs. Waring, for whom the portrait was intended, liked it tremendously," said Strange shortly. "Damn the fellow's impudence!" he thought.

Brydon continued his cutting and unwinding, painfully red in the face.

When it was all undone he waited for a moment before he removed the last covering, then he pulled it off with a quick, soft movement, and from a vague feeling of half shy delicacy he turned aside and began to cut up tobacco diligently.

When Strange saw his wife, not the cold living abstraction, but a warm, big-hearted, divinely-natural creature, alive there on the canvas before him, a sudden soft gush of tears flooded his eyes, and he shook and reeled at the queer, warm shock of them.

"Brydon," he said, turning round suddenly, "one makes a fool of oneself over her, it is a tribute to your genius."

Brydon looked at him and hesitated, then he said, in a half-fearful tone, looking away,—

"It is no tribute to my genius, it is that face! I never cried, I have roared and howled, you know, scores of times, but I never cried properly till I saw it; it is the strongest and the most touching woman's face I ever saw."

"It is, and you have done infinite justice to it."

"I had to paint her as she was there, I couldn't help myself; I shall never again do anything like it."

"What does Legrun say of it?"

He was silent for a minute.

"Did you think," he asked at last, angrily, "that I did that for Legrun's praise or blame? Did I paint *her* to be torn limb from limb by those old steely eyes?"

"As a matter of fact, I did not expect anything half so sensible from you; but this—this," he added slowly, with a spasm of generosity, "this shall hang in the Academy."

"If it does," said the boy, "I shall never touch a brush again."

"Well, we won't discuss it now."

"Nor at any other time. I shouldn't care a tuppenny damn, don't you know, for any fame for which you had to suffer."

"There was no word of suffering to me, or to any one else."

"Who said there was? But do you see the alterations I made?" he went on hurriedly, "I made you even vaguer than you were, and served the parson in the same way, and that carpet in Waring Church was too strong altogether, I got a piece of stem green stuff and substituted it."

"Well, it is a work of genius," said Strange, as he got into his coat.

"I am not such a fool as to deny that, but *I* didn't paint it, you know. Here, you'll break your neck on these stairs, let me light you. Good-night, dear old man."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHEN Mrs. Waring got the sketches of her children—for Strange had used almost physical force to compel Dacre to run over to Paris to sit to Brydon—the very first minute she found herself alone with them she cried her heart out over the two, then she sat herself down and systematically adored them.

She had them hung in the library where she could see them from her writing-table, and but for their weight she would have had them carried to her room every night.

Mr. Waring, in his emotionless way, valued his daughter's gift, but this chronic passion of adoration was beyond him. He had already borne much with divine patience; he had seen his wife carried away from his side for hours at a stretch, to waste her mind and soul in the duties of an ordinary squire's wife, and she had come back to babble of babies in a way that made his blood run cold. He had caught her thoughts wandering at moments when the crisis of a discovery was setting in, and with tears in her eyes that the subject under discussion could in nowise account for. Ah, he had suffered in a thousand indefinable ways!

But yet there were moments when he had her still, just as in the sweet old times, body and soul and brain, all to himself; when she still put out all the force of her keen, fine intellect, and saw, with her beautiful intuition, puzzles that had made his great man's brain reel.

Through all time had ever any man such a wife, he would think, as he watched her softly frowning, pondering over a thought and bringing out the result with that charming diffidence, that wonderful veneration for the nice intricacies of truth which characterised her, looking withal so young, so soft, so serene.

No wonder that the man's heart clave unto her !

And now those pictures ! That sublimely haughty young woman—that big, strong soldier, with pluck of a most soulless British order stamped all over him, came in and robbed him of the better part of himself.

They still sat side by side, hand in hand, and worked together, but they were no longer one. No wonder, indeed, that untimely age fell upon the man and forced him with its chill hand down on his stick, a little heavier as each day passed !

Mrs. Waring did not go out every day ; her restless yearning often took her no farther than the children's old nursery, where she would sit by their little chests of drawers, and finger their old yellowing baby-clothes with a shy, sad, wistful wonderment ; she had never put a stitch into one of them, and their shapes and intricacies were sealed mysteries to her.

Mary, now grown aged and grey, looked upon the state of affairs with much dissatisfaction, and seemed likely to continue to do so, for things, instead of getting

better, got worse. Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes did all they could to turn her gentle, persistent grief into a more healthy channel, and were by no means careful to spare her any plain speaking ; but it seemed impossible to get her to fit her new, sweet, sad experience into her old life, and to make a whole of it.

It is a frightful grind to get a great heartful of fresh emotions, of new sorrows and joys, into a middle-aged woman, and not to cause a general disruption. It seemed rather hard, however, that Mr. Waring should half perish in his wife's own particular earthquake. But though his grief lay down with him at night, and rose with him day by day, he cherished her with ever-increasing tenderness, and never by word or look expressed the smallest atom of reproach.

Towards the end of July a little fleecy cloud of hope, no bigger than a man's hand, appeared upon the horizon, and Mr. Waring grasped it with nervous despair.

After repeated puttings off, Gwen was coming for certain, in a week or two, to remain until the shooting took them North.

"Perhaps now," the poor man thought, "perhaps now she will find what she wants, and can rest and be satisfied, and our life will return to us. This maternal feeling must certainly be a very powerful and a very precious factor in a woman's making, or such an one as my wife would not be so touched and shaken by its advent and growth in her. It is a mystery, in truth, thus to come so late, born out of due season as it were, and so strongly to take possession of her. I certainly never should have classed her among the true mothers, the producing women ; they should be of a more

robust, a more animal type altogether. It is a most remarkable case, with curious complications. It is the daughter—the feminine part of her—that my wife yearns and pants for, the masculine element seems to affect her but little; when our son Dacre visits us I have in vain looked for any symptoms of satisfaction or restfulness.

"I feel so unusually depressed and aged this afternoon," he went on, slowly, laying down his fruitless pen, and gazing with sad eyes out of the window, "even my ordinary lucidity of brain seems clouding and thickening. It cannot be that I have already reached the ultimatum, and that the period of decadence is now upon me—that cannot surely be! Only just forty-seven," he cried softly, and his face sank down in his hands on the study table.

He raised it again, and went over to his cabinet, and touched his heaps of manuscript one by one with loving, lingering tenderness, but a little shakily.

"This but just begun!" he murmured; "this but just wanting the verification of an experiment or two; these, notes for a new work, the most comprehensive, the most exact we have yet made—ah! this book would have been very close up to the truth, nearer to it than anything yet produced.—And she looked with such keen, such very youthful pleasure to the lighter task of compilation; that youthfulness in her intellectual pleasures is a very precious gift of my wife's.

"Here is a little satirical skit she wrote in a playful moment: how charming it is, how delicate! Ah, my sweet young wife! More notes—more—and so few worked out to their final conclusion! Must I, then, take these symptoms as those of untimely decay," he

whispered, sitting down again, "I, who looked to long years of honest labour, in which I might have forged on farther than my fellows, and have erected some fresh finger-posts on the road to everlasting truth? To stop now, when the world is crying and wailing in the darkness of its ignorance, when men grasp any scrap of verified knowledge as a drowning man a straw, and must I be swept down the hill before I have breasted the crest? Must I sink to oblivion with my work but just begun, and with the heat of battle strong upon me—and she—my wife, my own, my helpmeet? Do none of these things strike and touch her? does this overmastering strange tumult of new emotions shut her heart to the awful beauty of truth?

"It is strange," he repeated, "strange, and very sad. The swift-running, smooth course of life has been paralysed for me; I am oppressed with torturing doubts, and—and—I believe it is not age, it is not the years which have stunned my powers, I believe it is this new phase of her life; then comes the consideration: is this a passing phase, or is it permanent? I cannot face the question!" he cried with a groan, holding his head in both hands to steady it.

Then he took his hat and stick, and made mechanically for the Rectory.

She always came from that direction, and always sadder than when she went forth.

But to-day she was different. When she saw her husband she did not keep to her ordinary soft, listless movements, and then, when she reached him, slip her hand into his mechanically, from mere reflex action, and strike out eagerly into an infant anecdote.

She started and flushed, and ran towards him with

outstretched hands, and looked wistfully up in his face ; and her mouth trembled as, for the first time, the great change in the man flashed itself into her, and her heart stood still and her brain reeled.

"Henry!" she cried, "my Henry, you are tired!"

He stooped, wonderingly, closer to her. "Dearest, no!"

She gazed with sickening dread up into his face.

"Ah, yes, you are tired and sad. Mr. Fellowes has been telling me so much, making things clear, and—and—yes, you are older, and I never saw it until this instant."

"My love, I am well!" he said, caressing her softly.

"It is I who have done this, Henry"—she silenced his protest with a soft, imperious motion—"they saw it weeks ago ; I am a bad wife now, as I have been a bad mother—ah, that is very sad!"

She laid her head down on their clasped hands, and with a little shudder broke into soft sobbing.

"You are a most true, most noble wife," he whispered, "my helpmeet in all things!"

"I have gone away and neglected you, and you have grown older."

"Come home, my best beloved, come home and rest."

"If I only could," she said wistfully ; "but, dear, I am restless, I cannot stay still."

"After Gwen went away," she continued softly, with bent head, as they paced slowly up the drive, "my heart seemed to fill with restless growth, new thoughts and feelings were for ever astir in me, I could not rest ; old feelings that should have had their budding

and birth long ago only then awoke, and beset me with sweet pain."

She stopped and leaned up against him. "I have never been able to tell you all this before, except indirectly. Ah, Henry, such strange new thoughts torture and soothe me; they war with one another continually, and there is not one drop of sweetness that has not two drops of bitterness to temper it withal."

"Let's walk on, dearest, you are cold."

"I have such strange yearnings, Henry, for baby touches and baby kisses; I, who have never felt them for my own, have to seek them among babies not of my flesh and blood. I have to find the pale ghosts of them amongst my lost children's little clothes."

"My love, not lost."

"Yes, Henry, lost, more than if the grave had closed over them; those forfeited things do not return. I have a mother's heart now when I no longer need it," she said, with a wan smile, "and I know—ah, I know so many things, such pitiful things. The other day a tiny baby grasped at my breast and tried to nestle his head there—to suck my breast, Henry; it was worse than death, for I knew I had lost the best sweetness of life."

"My love, my love, those things are not lost," cried her husband; and then, with sudden and surprising astuteness, he added, "there will be Gwen's children."

She clutched his hand in a sudden tremor of excitement.

"Ah, and then—*then*, too, Gwen might understand—now——" she coughed softly and broke off.

"But, Henry, I have you; we will go together as

we used to do ; perhaps work, regular work, may make me feel better."

"My love," he cried eagerly, "I am certain it is just the thing you want, the very thing."

"Perhaps," she said sadly, "perhaps it is."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONE morning Strange came into his wife's boudoir with his whip in his hand, and a light overcoat on his arm.

"I am going out beyond Highgate," he said, "to see a pointer pup ; it is a pretty drive, would you like to come ?"

She had been thinking with a sort of dread of the hours that must run before the darkness came, and of the numbers of times she would be expected to smile, to return brilliant answers to dull questions, and generally to keep up her superb deception.

She had a dozen engagements, but she decided to go with him.

He drove a high mail phaeton that ran very lightly.

"That Highgate hill is a bad one," he said, as they were starting, giving the brake a sharp tug ; "I don't think this will cave-in easily, however."

"Besides, Hengist and Horsa can be trusted anywhere," said Gwen, who knew nothing of ordinary nervousness.

"I wouldn't trust anything in horseflesh down a steep hill with the brake off. Look down that mesh of streets ! Taking it in patches, there isn't a more hideous, sordid, mean hole in the world than this London ; just look through that lane !"

Gwen gave a shrug of disgust.

"It's all frightful, and grey, and deadly dull, but that never strikes me as the worst part of life in these places. It is the hideous want of privacy that revolts me, and the awful nearness of one human creature to another, the sheer impossibility of thinking, or feeling, or looking, except under observation,—the horrible indecent openness of life."

"What do you know about it?" he asked, laughing.

"Oh, I have done slumming in my time, under Mrs. Meades' wing. I like new experiences, you know. We saw a great many frightful things while the craze lasted, but the worst of all was a cobbler's *ménage*. He had a wife and seven children, and they lived in two rooms; he never went out, that man, neither did his wife; she squatted on the floor all day and cleaned things with a patent soap which smelt worse than they did, and he saw all she did and thought and felt; the awful hunted look of that woman was a thing to dream of.

"While Mrs. Meades talked—'religion' she called it—the cobbler sewed leather, and glanced now and again at his wife in a way to make your blood freeze, and then he would hold up his awl in a ghastly fashion, and grin at her over it; it was no bit of steel he was gloating over, it was his wife's soul held up on that awl.

"But putting husbands and wives out of the question," she went on, "this appalling nearness of living is horrible. One must feel for ever on a dissecting table, having one's most hidden nerves pulled out one by one."

"They have no nerves, and they don't experiment

on one another, those people ; they don't live enough for that, they exist in a smoky, thick atmosphere of indifference."

"That man did experiment, and his wife was not indifferent ; she was nerves and nothing else."

"These were exceptions."

"The worst tragedies are made out of exceptions."

"Probably, exceptions are mostly unnatural."

"It is not unnatural to object to have one's sensations flayed alive !"

"Such sensitiveness is unnatural to a low, under-fed, semi-sentient state of life ; such people have enough to do to keep body and soul together, without considering them apart."

"But I contend they do consider them apart, they do make investigations."

"Yes, into the vices of their betters, which have a perennial interest for them as being beyond their reach. You won't catch them as a rule classifying one another and flaying souls. These are the distractions of the leisured classes."

"Then," said Gwen, "I wish I had been born in the other class."

"To what purpose ?" said her husband ; "you would have been an exception."

"Oh, then," she said impatiently, "I shall in future reserve all my pity for the exceptions, and retain my normal hardness of heart for the other crowd. I never could get universal philanthropy to appeal to me, and it's comfortable to put one's want of humanity on a reasonable basis. But those generations of square pegs in round holes, they worry one ! And yet people speak of a just God !"

"Poor God! What should we do without that universal scape-goat? As if He had anything to do with the matter! The fathers have trusted to chance, and the children suffer.

"But, at any rate," he went on, "whether the fathers or God are the real scape-goats, it's quite original nowadays to profess faith in justice, and to refrain from railing against the Almighty, so we'll let God and heredity have a rest; besides, we are losing the pauper scent and getting that of the country—did you catch that whiff? I am glad we are down this hill, the horses are unaccountable."

"Hengist actually looks like kicking," said Gwen.

"Bell, get off, will you, I believe there's a fly somewhere I can't spot."

"Sure enough, three on 'em, sir; and them horses is mortal thin-skinned since their clipping yesterday."

"What a duffer I was," said Strange to his wife, "not to look at them before we started; they are probably not half groomed and are tickling like the deuce, and I can't even have the satisfaction of swearing about it properly, as I was every bit as careless myself."

A quick little conviction shot into Gwen, that whatever God and the general ruck of fathers might be, her husband was just enough.

This silenced her for two solid miles. When they got near the inn, Strange suggested that they had better stay and lunch there.

"I ought to be back for luncheon, but it really doesn't matter," she said.

"I wonder what does, in her present mood?" thought Strange, as he helped her down.

As ill-luck would have it, a wretched faint feeling she had experienced once or twice before, came on her, and she reeled a little in her husband's hands.

He looked at her in the most utter astonishment ; he hadn't fathomed her yet, it seemed.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

She blushed suddenly.

"No, my foot got twisted in my shoe-lace."

"The girl is lying," he thought, with a most unpleasant shock.

He brought her into a small, clean, quaint old room, fragrant with mignonette ; a bunch stood in a glass on the cottage piano, and there was a long green box full of it on the window-sill.

"Now sit here in the shade," he said, "and take off your hat, and rest."

He stood for a moment and watched her, then he arranged the pillows on the couch and made her lie down, with an involuntary protecting manner quite unlike his usual airs of equality and sexlessness.

That lie had made her all at once so young to him, so infinitely pathetic.

He could have taken her in his arms like a little child, and hushed her to sleep.

When he had gone she clenched her hands in a rage.

"You can't call your soul your own with such a man!" she muttered ; "it's bondage worse than death. Talk of that cobbler, he's not the only man who holds his wife's soul on an awl—oh, the horrible, horrible, horrible indecency of marriage without love! And this vile pretence of fair living!" she went on, sitting up and staring out of the window, "the jokes we have together, and the talks!"

She got up and went about the room examining the curiosities, the stuffed birds, and the shells, and the awful oleographs.

"What's this?" she said, lifting the glass from some glittering object; but she dropped it as if it had stung her.

"Ah, why did I touch it? I am sick to death of everything."

She went over to the sofa and flung herself back among the cushions.

It was a great slab of frosted wedding-cake, kept over for the first christening.

"Oh, it's all a most frantic joke!" she said. "Here he comes; I must sit up and play to my audience, knowing all the time that the audience sees into the marrow of my bones."

She was not perhaps quite sane, as saneness goes, all through their lunch, but she was strangely brilliant, her eyes flashed with a queer, fluttering light, her lips were soft and mobile, and she ate her chicken with a will, and only that her natural fineness of nature restrained her, she would have seized the big old cut-glass decanter of wine, and have drained it at a gulp. But she kept the curb well on, and never once flagged in her course, which surprised herself even more than it did her husband.

But when he went out to see the horses put in, she had a little private collapse all to herself.

It was hotter than ever and the flies grew more troublesome, but it was all very fresh and green.

"I never knew this part was so pretty," she said, as they were driving through a chestnut-bordered lane. Talking was an effort, but it seemed a less exhaustive

one than sitting there mute under her husband's reflections.

"It's pretty," he said absently, "and almost as little known as Central Africa; look at the indifferent calm estate of those cows, they might live in the desert for anything they know of the noise of life."

"Yes, and here we are in the thick of genteel barbarism," said Gwen, as they turned into the high road. "It is well for the cows that they live by sight, not by imagination; it's a horrid anomaly, the cows and the country, and not a hundred yards away 'Arry rampant."

"I believe I like the combinations, still life and life in the struggle, and 'Arry everywhere, from cradle to grave, his cemetery not a stone-throw away."

"Your toleration is rather overpowering," remarked Gwen sardonically; "you speak in the same kindly good-humoured way of 'Arry and of God, adopting the same heavy-fatherly style to both."

"I really beg their pardons, but, as a matter of fact, I look on them both as much maligned beings, and as requiring the conscientious championship of all honest citizens. We judge the two, the Potter and His clay, by measuring them by our own standards. I think, for my own part, it's amazing impudence to sit at one's ease and damn 'Arry, as is the vogue now; nearly as much the vogue as sitting at ease and criticising the Almighty. I must, however, leave God and man, and proceed to think chiefly of horses for the present. Look at those brutes of donkey carts!"

They were just going up the hill, which was abnormally crowded. The donkey carts were ubiquitous.

"I never saw them so thick before," said Strange.

"Why, I forgot, of course, it's a holiday! I wonder if it will be so crowded down the hill? Those tram lines are the deuce for hoofs."

They drove on silently between the rows of quaint old houses, till they got to the crest of the hill coming down towards Holloway.

"The horses seem steady enough now," said Gwen.

"Yes, they're all right—just as well too. Did you ever see such a crowd!—Phew!"

There was a rustle and a flying glimmer of white from a costermonger's cart coming slowly up the hill behind a jaded ass.

It was the *Echo* of the day before, caught by a sudden flickering breeze, and carried fantastically to and fro right under the horses' noses; they threw up their heads and sniffed angrily, but Strange had them well in hand, and soothed their terror gently, and, being no fools, the brutes were just realising the causelessness of their fright, when a demon got into the breeze, caught the paper in its clutches, and with a rushing swirl of leaves, dashed it into Hengist's two eyes, right between the blinkers.

Blinded, tickled, irritated to madness, the horse lashed out wildly, plunged forward, carrying Horsa with him, and tore down the hill.

They were beyond restraint now; it was only possible to swing them by sheer strength out of destruction's way. It was a touch-and-go game from the first.

Just as they got very nearly down the hill, there was a sudden jarring click. Gwen saw her husband's leg drop sharply. He turned one look on her.

"Brake's gone!" he shouted, sawing the mouths

of the frantic horses till the veins stood out like cords on his wrists.

He would have felt the whole thing less hideous and awful if even then he could have seen one sign of failing courage in his wife, if she had once clutched him, once cried out, once showed an atom of weak womanhood. But in all the mad, tumultuous race with death her calm, half-scornful face loomed on him, watching each movement of his, and not one shade paler.

She was more beautiful and less of a woman than she had ever been in all her life.

They were just at the twist of the hill, the traffic was denser than ever, the carriage swayed wildly, and the shrill screaming of women was giving the last touch to the horses' madness. The final crash was upon them.

"One last experiment," thought Strange, laughing aloud in a grim spasm of humour. "Gwen!" he shouted, "will you kiss me once, as women kiss men?"

She might have done it without that clause; she changed colour for the first time, her mouth twitched, she loosed her hands from their half-mechanical grasp on the seat, and looked in her husband's face laughing above her.

No tears ever held the pathos of that laugh.

"Why can't I kiss him and be done with it?" she thought wildly. "Truth or lie, what matters it now!"

She moved forward slightly with curved lips, then she looked again, one little look, but it was enough; her hands fell limp into her lap, and she shivered from head to foot.

"No!" she shouted, her eyes aflame, "if that had been possible I shouldn't have left it until now."

Then she pulled herself together to show a decent front to death.

The silent laugh on Strange's face broke into sound, above all the bedlam of clang and yell, then it ceased suddenly.

Great gouts of blood and foam flew to right and left from the lips and nostrils of the horses, who were blind now in their anguish.

"Hold tight, Gwen!" roared her husband hoarsely.

The horses swayed and shuddered, screaming with terror.

With one despairing shriek Bell covered his face.

The swerving wheel caught in the tram-line, and then came the end.

CHAPTER XXXV.

As always happens in such cases, it was several minutes after the crash before any one with an ounce of reason in his head appeared on the scene.

Then a fellow—he was in the dog line, “and knew a thing or two”—dropped in and took a rapid and comprehensive view of affairs, and by the help of a fair amount of blasphemy, did what was best under the circumstances.

Strange was only stunned. After a time he sat up, and looked about him.

A howl from Bell struck on his ears. He turned and saw the horses shivering among the broken mass of carriage, and the dog-man rubbing their noses to a soft gurgling accompaniment.

“Where, where?” he asked faintly, and in reply to a pointed finger, lifted himself up with both hands, and groped half-blindly to a huddled-up lump of muslin and lace.

He just knew she was lying there, cold, and white, and moveless. He touched her forehead; it was like marble. He laid his hand on her heart; it was still.

A sudden wonder seized him as to who had undressed and covered her with such lovely decency, and he

looked with half vague inquiry at the two women hovering near.

As a matter of fact, it was the dog-man who had done it, with his eyes turned on the two women, whom he cursed foully the whole time.

"Have you sent for a doctor?" demanded Strange, forcing the dizziness out of his brain.

"Yes, yes," was yelled from twenty throats, "and here he is."

He was a sufficiently foolish young man, and seemed floored.

"Live far from here?" he asked.

"In Ebury Square," said Strange. "Is there any danger in taking her so far?"

"None, if conveyed on boards in a four-wheeler."

Strange saw at once that the dog-man was the only one who had his senses about him; Bell, though absolutely unhurt, was altogether useless, and the other man had been left at the inn.

"You know the horses and cabs hereabout?" said Strange. "Get the smoothest cab and some boards, and here, you'll want help, don't spare tips."

The man went, and was back before the doctor had made up his mind what to say to cover his ignorance.

A fat woman, who had lent the mattress to cover the boards, and who had been hovering over his wife for some time, here called Strange aside.

"You had better have your own doctor at once," she said, "that there young man is soft. She wants skill, and, sir," she added, with a soft twiddle of her thumb, "I have my suspicions."

Strange looked enquiringly at her, and a cold shiver ran down to his toes.

For hours after she was brought home Gwen lay insensible. The doctor did nothing.

"Her physique alone will help her," he said, when Strange seemed to demand action of some sort.

"She will regain her consciousness all right," he said. "There is another complication, I believe," he added, looking keenly at Strange, "but the treatment of that must come later."

Again the horrid coldness paralysed Humphrey's very marrow.

"In view of this," the doctor went on, "what about her mother being summoned?"

Strange thought for a moment. Her mother was, of course, quite out of the question, and he remembered that Mrs. Fellowes was ill.

"Is this necessary at once?" he asked.

"No, I will tell you when the need arises—that is, if any should. Her physique would tide over almost anything."

As the clock began to strike midnight, Strange saw the doctor stoop suddenly, and lay his head on Gwen's heart, then open her eyes and touch her eyeballs.

When he raised himself his face had altered.

"Now we shall soon see a change," he said; "perhaps you had better stand back, even the shock of joy might hurt her."

Strange gave a ghastly grin in the shadow of the curtain.

By a superhuman effort in all those hours of anguished waiting, even when the doctor and the nurse, in their consideration, had left him alone for the purpose, Strange had never once kissed or caressed

his wife, or even so much as touched her except in matters of service.

Gwen stirred almost imperceptibly, the doctor looked round the curtain at Strange.

"Touch her, and speak to her very gently," he said. He bent gently over her.

"Gwen, wake up, dear, wake up, sweetheart!"

He wondered the next second why he had said it.

Perhaps the absurdity of the words struck Gwen's grim sense of humour, she certainly stirred uneasily, and made a feeble, pathetic little try to throw up the limp hand that lay on the quilt.

Strange moved back under cover of his curtain.

"Good!" said the doctor, "try again." He was watching Strange's face with some interest.

"He has aged ten years in eight hours, poor devil!" he thought, then he took a long survey of his patient. "I wonder if she is worth it all, she is a trifle too superb for me! She looks like one of those women who keep their flesh too much under."

Gradually Gwen's stirrings grew stronger and more frequent, and at last she opened her eyes slowly, and looked out with vague questioning.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"You have been ill, dear."

"Ill?" she murmured, perplexedly. "I want light."

The doctor moved the screens from before the candles, Gwen raised her head feebly.

"What is it?" she asked again.

The doctor lifted her and gave her a draught he had ready; she was too weak to resist him, and presently she fell off into a drowsy half-slumber.

After what seemed to Strange a lifetime, she again

moved, woke, and repeated the old question, this time audibly and with a tinge of imperiousness.

"Ah, she'll do now," said the doctor to himself, grinning a saturnine grin; "when a woman shows her pet weakness she's out of danger."

He put back the screen. "I am thankful to say," he said to her, "you are the sole sufferer, and you'll soon be all right again."

Humphrey was well then. She shut her dazed eyes and tried to think, but she could only hover off into drowsiness.

After a time she opened her eyes again, and said,—

"I would like my maid; perhaps you would tell Sir Humphrey that I am better."

"Your husband hardly requires the information," said the doctor drily. "I shall leave Lady Strange in your hands, Sir Humphrey, and I shall remain on the premises in case you want me."

His wife turned her eyes away, and began searching for her handkerchief; he stooped and gave it to her.

The sweat still clung to his ghastly forehead and hung on his hair.

"He said you were not hurt," she said; "you look as if you were."

"It's been rather a disturbing day," he said, with a short laugh. "Never mind me, I'll be as jolly as a sandboy after a bath."

She turned herself uneasily on the pillow, and shut her eyes. It was horrible to have him there above her.

"Poor little child, poor little unfinished thing!" he thought pitifully. "Shall I send your maid, dear?"

"Yes, please, and won't—oh, won't you rest?"

"Yes, I'm off," he said, in his old cheery voice, and he went outside the door, and watched there till morning.

She was very white the next morning, and kept falling off into drowsy little sleeps, but she declared she was all right and meant to get up; the necessity of staying in bed was a new one and she loathed it.

She felt more in her husband's power, lying there ill; she grew suspicious too, for the first time in her life, and set herself to search for meanings in looks.

"I am demoralised," she kept repeating. Then she turned her face from the light, and neither spoke nor looked except when she absolutely had to.

Strange could make nothing at all of her, and he soon left her for sheer mercy's sake.

When he had gone she raised herself up and rang the bell.

"Give me what I am to take, and then leave me for two hours, I will sleep if I can."

The girl brought her a bowl of beef-tea, and she plunged heroically into it.

"I am doing my duty," she said to herself, with a sneer; "but oh, will this liquid never get less? on the contrary, it seems to increase. You won't let me be disturbed, will you, Gill?" she said.

As soon as the girl had gone she got up and locked the door, then she rolled up her hair, put on a dressing-gown, and sat down on the floor.

"I have two hours in which to have it out with myself—this horror made manifest," she said. "How was it that this most natural of all complications never entered my head? I wasn't even warned by

those new and altogether abominable feelings of weakness."

She leaned her head against the ottoman and shivered, then she reached over for a shawl that lay on it, and wrapped herself up in it; but still she shivered.

She stood up and was about to go back to her bed, but she turned sharply round with another shudder. "Bah! I can't," she said, and, throwing a fur rug on to a couch, she lay down there, and soon grew warm enough to continue her dreary meditations.

"And so I, I, Gwen Strange, will soon be the mother of a child—and Humphrey its father!"

She hid her face in the soft fur. "It is ghastly!" she cried, "it is degradation, feeling towards him as I do, and as I've always done! I am debased to think that any man should have the least part of a woman so terribly in his power, when she can't, can't, can't," she almost shrieked, "give him the best. What do girls know of the things they make lawful for themselves? If they did, if they were shown the nature of their sacrifice, then marriage would cease till it carried love, absolute love in its train. Was I mad, my God! was I mad, with all my boasts of sanity? Nothing, nothing," she moaned, "but perfect love makes marriage sacred, nothing, neither God's law nor man's; and now the climax has come here in the outward and visible sign of my shame. I have sinned, not only in the present and the past, but in the future. I have hurt an innocent unborn creature, I have set a barrier between it and its mother.

"And Humphrey! Now I must sit under those deep, all-pervading eyes of his and feel myself ten

thousand times his chattel. Now we have a common hope, a common interest, almost a common existence; now every touch of his, every look of his, will burn me and remind me of my shame. Talk of the shame of women who have children out of the pale of marriage, it's nothing to the shame of those who have children and don't love. Those others, they have the excuse of love—that's natural, that purifies their shame; this—our life—the portion of quite half the well-to-do world—this is unnatural, no sin can beat it for cruel baseness!"

She huddled into her rug and lay silent, wild, mad thoughts whirling through her brain. Gradually she grew calmer and more reasonable.

"At least I can do one thing," she whispered.

"I will do all I can to make up to my child for the harm I have done it ignorantly; I will take care of myself, I will do everything I can to bring a natural creature into the world, I will try to protect it from its heredity. I am glad I know; I will do all I can to right your wrong, poor child!"

She waved her hands to and fro in a sort of dumb agony.

"And I could not even kiss your father, I couldn't even kiss him when we both thought we were facing death!"

She suddenly laughed aloud, a low, curious, mocking laugh, and put her hands up to her head.

"I must rest!" she cried, "I must not think any more. I will have some more of that draught, it makes thinking a pulpy, sweet sort of muddle, it takes all the keen edges off truth. If I did right," she went on, throwing her arms back, "I would go out on a crusade

to girls and tell them all the truth ; then, let them sin in knowledge, not in ignorance ; let them know that love, perfect love, is the only sanctification of marriage ! Churches and rings are a mere farce."

She had come to the last shred of her strength ; she crept into bed, and rang for her draught.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FEW days after, she was quite well enough to get up; the doctor told her to do so in the morning, but after looking out into the day she lay down again. She was not quite ready for life yet; here, in her bed, she was more or less aloof from it, but after a few hours' restless thinking, getting up and lunch came to be a distinct relief.

Directly after lunch she went out for a drive, and when she returned, and had got into her tea-gown, she went down to her boudoir and threw herself on the sofa with a weary little laugh.

"Why can't I rest or sew? why won't my body get as tired as my brain? I could move a hundredweight this minute."

She got up and moved, with hardly any exertion, a great cabinet that would have tried the strength of a fair-sized man.

"Humphrey declared I couldn't," she said, laughing again. "Oh! I can't sit here and think. I wonder where Humphrey is? I believe I should like to ride a race, or to spend an hour on a switchback railway!"

She went down and wandered from room to room with her long, strong movements, every one of them the very incarnation of healthy grace.

At last she found herself at the door of Strange's den. With a sudden, wilful impulse she opened the door and went in. Every window was open, and the soft, cool air was playing high jinks among the curtains.

Strange had brought his collection of odds and ends from his chambers, and had scattered them through the big, alcoved room in a sort of orderly disorder. The floor was stained and spread with an amazing collection of skins. In his divings into studios he had learnt the comfort and use of screens; there were several in the room, kept well out of the way of knees and shoulders.

Thanks to the draught the cigar smoke had lost its heaviness, and was floating as a sort of spiritual essence through the textures.

For some minutes after Gwen came in she could hardly discern it at all; when she did she wished she could transport it to her part of the house; it struck her as being a purer scent than one gets in women's rooms.

"How hospitable those chairs look!" she said, feeling one. "Does he lose all his right-hand gloves, I wonder! Do all men? As a matter of fact, I know amazingly little of men or of their ways! This is a clean, self-respecting room, I like it; I wonder I never took any notice of it before! Ah, another screen!"

She moved it aside and found an alcove where an easel stood, and on this a picture hidden by a drapery of primrose and chestnut silk.

"The way that drapery falls is quite different from anything else," said Gwen, stepping back a pace or two; "why won't my tea-gowns go like that!"

Something suggested to her just then to pry no

further, but she swept the suggestion aside with the draperies, and saw before her her own painted image. For one minute she felt inclined to rip the canvas from end to end, and to kill once and for all the vague look of motherhood in the woman's eyes.

"This wretch!" she muttered at last; "so she's in the house! As if I hadn't enough to handicap me without her."

She turned away with a look of loathing and jealous hatred, and sat down.

After a few minutes she got up slowly and turned to leave the room, then almost in spite of herself she went back to the picture, and began again her angry, eager inspection of it.

As she stood with her head thrown back and her hands clenched involuntarily, her husband came in. He did not see her at first; when he did, he stopped, and watched her.

It was a revelation and a shock to see her in this abandonment of jealous anger. He rustled a book on the table to arouse her, and quoted, laughing:—

"Where the apple reddens, never pry!
Lest we lose our Eden—Eve and I."

She moved quickly aside into the shade.

"When did this come?" she asked, in a low, constrained voice.

"Brydon sent it a few days ago. You are better?"

"I am quite well, thank you."

"The doctor thinks directly you can travel we had better go into the country."

She flung a swift, furtive look at him. "How much does he know, I wonder?"

"Won't you sit down?" he asked, putting a soft, low chair within her reach; "and may I smoke?"

She bent her head without speaking, and he saw that her hands were moving restlessly.

He lit his cigar in a leisurely fashion, then he drew up a chair and sat down near her and began to smoke.

After a time, he set to wonder how long this remarkable vigil was going to hold out. He was determined to keep silence till his wife spoke; he saw she was fighting in her dumb, concentrated way for expression; he felt certain some sort of an avalanche was about to descend upon him, and he preferred that she should set it sliding herself. Perhaps the girl had had too much lonely struggle, and her brain as well as her body had weakened with it; at any rate, the first thought she felt herself producing audibly was,—

"I wish almost you were a fool, Humphrey!"

He took his cigar out of his mouth. "Indeed, why?"

"Because then," she said, rather desperately, "I shouldn't feel so altogether like one myself!"

She stood suddenly up and looked down at him.

"Look here," she said, "you are better in every point than I am; you are better in brain, you are stronger, you have seen more, you know more, you are better all round. If you were a fool, you see, I could despise you; if even you had once made yourself ridiculous in my eyes or had demeaned yourself, what I have to say would come easy."

"Come to the point at once, Gwen," he said. "What is it?"

She took no notice of his remark, but went to the picture, and drew the coverings over the face.

"What has the doctor told you?"

"The doctor has told me nothing definite."

She turned away to hide her hot face.

"You know perfectly well," she said, in a low voice, "that I shall be the mother of a child of yours in some months."

"Yes," he said, gently.

"But you do not know," she went on, "you do not know that this is such a shame to me, such a deathly, burning shame, that I hate the light, I hate the eyes of any human creature on me. I would like to fly in the night to some desert place and hide myself."

"Are you mad, Gwen?"

"No, I am sane, as sane as on the day I sold myself to you for an experiment. Can you not see, Humphrey, that I am as shameful, I, your wife, as any one of those women you told me of, not one of whom you loved—loved?" she added, with an involuntary raising of her head.

"I am no nearer to you now," she went on, "than I was that day, not a jot nearer, and yet I am going to be the mother of your child! Are you dense, Humphrey, or is it because you are a man, and are grown used to chattels, that you cannot see the depth of my shame and humiliation, and the reasons for it?"

She faltered and swayed slightly.

"Sit down, Gwen, sit down at once."

He drew up the chair to her. "The situation seems a curious one," he said at last, "this outbreak seems to be the climax to a long course of morbid thinking."

"You cannot understand," she said faintly.

"I confess I cannot, altogether. When you married me you were no ignorant girl——"

"Humphrey," she cried, her eyes absolutely burning on him, "I did not think that I should have to defend myself to you in this! I thought you would know the absolute ignorance of girls. It is no veiled ignorance, it is absolute, or else a mere vague——"

"Dear, it was a cowardly and an unjust reproach. However, things have now come to a head with us, it is no use delaying; you want, I gather, a separation?"

She started.

"I thought I would like to go home for a time—alone."

For a minute Strange considered. "This is no time for softness or entreaty," was the result of his reflections.

"We need have no legal separation, Gwen—as yet," he added, with slow emphasis.

She trembled from head to foot; he saw it, but went on calmly.

"You are not strong enough now for any trouble of that sort, but later on, of course, some arrangement must be come to. By the way, what will your father and mother say of this?"

"They will not say anything," she said bitterly; "they will silently wonder together in the library."

"And Dacre——"

"Dacre is a fool."

"And the world?" he asked.

He felt quite interested in the answer; the shock was beginning to freeze the pith in him.

"I don't think the world will speak of me, I have no quality it can seize on for gossip. No gossip has any savour unless it deals with sexual relations, and

until now I thought I was absolutely sexless," she said slowly, looking blankly out into space.

Her face was awful, her husband turned away from it.

"Gwen, Gwen," he said at last, coming back to her, "do you understand what you are doing?"

"I do," she said, heavily; "I cannot bear this shame in your presence, I should lie down and die under it. Can you think I do this lightly? can you not understand the awfulness of speaking such things aloud?"

"I understand it all, dear, but have you counted the cost? You will be weak and ill, perhaps in danger; can you bear it all? If you finally decide to go alone to your home, I will start the same day for Africa. I have been asked to undertake that expedition for the relief of Broad, my old friend, the missionary I told you about. I do not intend to treat this resolve of yours as a freak, Gwen, or to give it the grace of one. You are a strong woman, and, from your own point of view, sane. Once again, have you counted the cost?"

"I have lived virtually alone all my life," she said, "I think I can bear sickness and pain alone. Humphrey! Humphrey! let me make one excuse for myself. I did not know what marriage was when I tried my experiment."

He looked down on her upturned face with a great tenderness.

"I don't blame you, dear. You are sinning terribly, but you know not what you do. Your sin is unnatural, for it is against yourself; you have let a morbid spot in you grow sick to rottenness, and as time goes on,

child, you will suffer as few women know how to suffer ; you are sinning ignorantly, and your punishment will come, but from another hand than mine. But there is one thing I will speak of," he said, with grave sternness ; "see that you are not ashamed of your motherhood. Forget, if you like, that the child is in part mine ; do not forget that it is wholly yours, bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh ; beware, at least, of sinning knowingly. You have had a warning, Gwen, in this ; profit by it, don't let this child grow up without knowing the everyday uses of a mother. Don't let any other human creature suffer in this as you have suffered."

Gwen listened to him with bent head, and every word dropped into her soul like molten lead.

There was an awful resistless finality in every word of his, in every tone. He had to stoop to catch her answer, and her face was almost livid.

"I will try and be a good mother ; I have no wish to fail in every relation of life."

"Don't move until I return," said her husband.

He went into the dining-room and brought back some wine. She turned on him a look of dumb protest, but she drank it. "And now, come to this sofa and lie down."

She obeyed him as if she were in a dream, wishing with vague pain that he would touch her, even if it were only once.

After a few minutes she turned from the light to shut out his face. He heard her, and drew down the blind softly ; he seemed to her all-hearing as well as all-seeing.

"Oh, if only he were a fool !" she cried to herself, "I might endure it."

The room was cool and still, and the lowered blinds flapping lazily in the breeze were like a lullaby. Gwen was worn out body and mind, and as she lay in the coolness her hurt heart stopped writhing, her poor foolish shame ceased to burn, her fingers relaxed softly and forgot to clench themselves, and at last she fell asleep like a tired child.

Her husband went softly to the sofa; she started slightly, and a twist of pain came into her brow. He smiled grimly.

"Even in her sleep," he muttered, "and I am ready to swear that all the time it is only an idea. And now this child—the best shot in my locker, seems about to run an awful mucker in the business. Ah, Gwen, if you only knew what you cast from you in your splendid way!—Ah well, there's one satisfaction; if you're not mine, my Gwen, you're no man's. Ah, my poor Gwen, my darling, God keep you!"

He stooped down over her, and for a minute or two let her breath come and go on his cheek; then he stood up and went to his writing-table, and let his face fall heavily into his hands.

When he looked up at last at a slight, soft rustle of silk, there had gone out of it, for ever, the look of cool buoyant youth, which was its distinguishing characteristic.

When Gwen awoke the blinds were up and it was dusk, and the tea had just been brought in.

"Three hours at the very least," she thought with much discomfort, as she sipped her tea; "and watched by him the whole time!"

When she had finished her tea she was rising to leave the room.

Her husband stopped her.

"Will you please sit down again for a few minutes?"

"The dressing-bell has gone," she said unwillingly.

"That doesn't matter," he said, "we can be late for once. I fancy," he went on coolly, "that your pride is of a sufficiently rational and well-bred order not to think itself obliged to make any difficulties about money matters."

"I will do as you wish about that."

"And if any emergency requiring your interference should arise, will you consent to act?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"And now," he said, "comes the question of how this business is to be presented to the world."

She raised her head impatiently. "The world won't trouble itself with me."

"You'll escape better than most women, but you won't get off scot-free; you are a woman, and the world is the world. I will make the matter right at the Clubs; you want to go to your mother for a short time, and I wish to go to Africa, where delays are apt to occur, and I have a convenient reputation for vagabondage. If I were you, I would immediately inform every woman of your acquaintance of our arrangement in a candid spirit of information. And, Gwen, as the most awful misfortune that ever befell a child is to be cast on the world without a mother, see that your care for this mother's health and, when the time of peril comes, for her life, is as great as mine would be."

"I shall not betray your trust in any way," she said quietly.

"I shall not trouble you to write, I shall find other means of hearing of you. But even if you are dying,

Gwen, and I know it, I shall not come to you unless you distinctly and in your right mind ask me to do so ; then, dear, I shall come ; otherwise, and later on, we can make definite arrangements. Good-bye, Gwen, good-bye, dear."

He went to the door and held it open to let her pass.

She paused, and turned her two sad eyes on him.

"Go, child," he said gently, "go quickly."

When she had gone, he locked the door and fell on the sofa, still warm from her sleeping body, and fought down his agony in decent silence. Then he washed and dressed, and went down to his dinner.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE next day Strange went down and told Mrs. Fellowes more or less about it, and put his wife entirely into her hands.

People were less surprised than might have been supposed at Strange's suddenly-organised expedition. He had broken conventional laws now for so long that if he had settled down into a solid everyday life, without some characteristic protest, he would have been regarded rather as a fraud.

The first possible companion his thoughts fell on was Brydon.

"It would be bringing him out into the wilderness with a vengeance," he said ; and, as a matter of fact, it was just what Brydon wanted at the time, and he was overjoyed at the offer.

When Tolly heard of the proposed move, he came to a firm resolve to be in it. At first Strange absolutely refused to take him, but at last his persistence became so annoying that he gave in, but not till Tolly had taken the most powerfully-expressed oaths of abstinence.

When all this was settled, Tolly looked up with a grin, and remarked deprecatingly,—

"If you 'adn't given in to take me straight, I meant

to reach you crooked at Suez, sir; I never intended, your honour, to let you face them black varmint without me."

Strange looked at the hideous grinning creature, whom one good puff of wind could blow off the face of the earth.

"Do you know that you are an idiot, Tolly?"

"Yes, sir," said Tolly cheerfully.

"And that you're very likely going to your death?"

"Not when you're about, sir; death and you ain't mates."

"You're to go with Bell to-day and get rigged out," said Strange.

"Yes, sir, thank your honour; but I've took notice of them pants and sich as were sent to your honour, and 'ave hordered the same for myself, barrin' a worser quality."

"Well, upon my word!"

"Arrivin' at Suez without nothin' to suit the climate might 'ave inconvenienced your honour," remarked Tolly, with bland consideration. "I have likewise perwided a breechloader and a rewolver."

"Oh, have you? Bring me those weapons without a moment's delay, and then go with Bell and get your outfit; I pay for those pants; and now, don't go about the place crowing over the other servants."

"Oh Lord, sir, if you were to hear them over my teeth you'd take back that order. Seein' likewise that the teeth came out of your honour's own pocket, and are a credit to your establishment, as the dentist hisself said."

"Will you be good enough to go to the devil, Tolly? I'm busy."

"Yes, sir," said Tolly; and he took himself off to crow conscientiously the rest of the day.

For the next two months Gwen comported herself to the satisfaction of no one; she was reticent with the Fellowes, and her mother simply appalled her.

Mrs. Waring's nervous, gentle little attempts at being a mother; the delicate tendrils she kept constantly throwing out in her daughter's direction; her queer, quaint experiments in the expression of the emotions, simply worried Gwen to death. She refused to let herself see the pathos of it all, or to be touched.

Indeed, as time went on, and her weakness grew more apparent to others, the demeanour of her mother grew into a terror to her. She would fly from it to her own room, where she would sit, with her idle hands lying in her lap, in a quiet agony of loneliness.

It was a point of honour with her to keep herself calm; she ate and drank, too, and she rested obediently whenever Mary, who had taken the physical part of her under her charge, said she needed rest; she drove when the old woman prescribed air, and walked when movement was supposed to be necessary. She was a mere automaton in her absolute yielding to orders concerning her health.

During this time Mr. Waring made a wild attempt to expand into a father. He would issue from time to time from his library with a bundle of random papers in his hand, and entertain Gwen with discourse, grave and gay, mostly concerning Africa, of which continent he had rather a poor opinion, and which he painted with lurid colours.

As he reeled out anecdotes of the gruesomeness of

the climate, the impracticability of travelling, the hideous forms diseases assumed, the congenital villainy of the natives, more especially of that portion of the land into which Strange meant to penetrate, and of which he certainly possessed a most intimate knowledge, Gwen used to watch him with a curious cold sort of pain, and wonder if he were human, till one day Mrs. Fellowes found out the existence of these ghastly entertainments, and stopped them.

One morning, when Mr. Waring was thus engaged, his wife sped away in a half furtive fashion and shut herself into the children's nursery. Kneeling down by the drawers she began to pull out great heaps of soft, white lawn, and lace, and creamy flannel; then with much puzzled doubt she set to sorting the things into little heaps, each after its kind; when that was done she went softly out, and in a few minutes returned with old Mary.

"Has my daughter provided herself with these little things?" she asked nervously.

"I don't know, ma'am; I was thinking of speaking to her on the subject."

"These are good, are they not?—the lace seems to me to be real, and I do not see any holes."

"Lord, ma'am, they are like new; it isn't likely that I'd have my clothes torn after two babies; I've brought a set through six, ma'am!"

"Do the fashions in these things change, Mary?"

"Bless you, no, ma'am! Set up long-clothes babies with fashions!"

"Mary, would you be good enough to get me a pretty basket?"

"You couldn't have a prettier one than this one,

ma'am," said Mary, pulling out the old lace and muslin one which had held the belongings of her own baby children.

Mrs. Waring took up the thing, and examined it curiously, and thought of the awe with which she used to regard it.

"Do babies nowadays use these things?" she asked.

"Lord, ma'am, yes, and will till the millennium."

Mrs. Waring put the little things in delicately, one by one.

"Now, Mary, I will take them to my daughter," she said, with a little quiver of her lips.

She knocked gently at her daughter's door.

As it happened, she could hardly have come at a worse time. Gwen had just escaped from her father; besides, for three weeks now, there had come no news from Strange, and in spite of herself she was all on edge with unnamed terrors.

When Mrs. Waring's knock came, she was sitting listlessly looking out of the window.

"Oh, I am so sickeningly tired," she said, "and I wish she would not always knock in that tremulous way." She hardened her face, and threw the door open.

Her mother gave a quick little swallow and came forward falteringly, while Gwen still held the door open and watched her.

"Will you please close the door, dear Gwen?" she asked.

Gwen complied, and then came towards the basket and lifted one of the white frilly things carelessly.

Suddenly the truth flashed on her and she trembled with indignation, while her mother stood pathetically before her, like a criminal at the bar.

Gwen was the first to speak; her mother's face touched her in a vague way.

"Won't you sit down, mother?" she said, in her cold, gentle voice. "Do you wish me to have these things? I am so very much obliged to you. I ordered some before I left London, but I believe it is always better to have a reserve stock of everything."

"I thought I would like to see a child of yours in the little things," faltered her mother.

A horrible feeling came on Gwen that her mother was about to cry. She took out one or two of the things.

"That is lovely lace," she said hurriedly, "better than any the woman showed me. I had no idea you had any interest in such matters."

Then one fervent wish took possession of her, that her mother would complete her gift, and go. But she was not to be delivered just yet.

Mrs. Waring was on her way to the door with bowed head, when suddenly with a short, smothered cry she turned and faced her daughter. She saw the quick recoil in the girl's face, and with a supreme effort the small, fragile creature calmed herself and sat down.

"Gwen," she said, looking at the tall woman brooding gloomily above her, then at the basket on the bed, "will you try to suffer my love, dear? I cannot ask you for yours, I have not earned it, I never knew what it was to be a mother till too late. But, dear, take the love I bear you gently, don't recoil from me as you did just now,"—Gwen winced—"as you have done many times. I will not intrude on you, dear, I have made a mistake to-day in asking you to accept these things."

"No, no, mother," interrupted the girl.

"Yes, dear, I have ; I do not reproach you, but you are hard, and that fault is mine more than yours. When you were a little child, Gwen, did you ever wish for my love—I mean the ordinary outspoken natural love that women give their children?"

Mrs. Waring bent forward and looked into her daughter's face with wide, eager eyes.

Gwen looked into the upturned face, and her heart stirred with pity ; then a dreary feeling came on her that the time was too solemn for lies.

"I longed for it every day that I lived," she said, in a slow, reluctant voice, turning away.

"Ah, and now it is too late ! I did cling to that last delusion, I did hope that in the careless vigour of childhood, in the fresh joy of a young animal, you might have forgotten to want the outward signs of mother-love. Gwen, Gwen dear, let your child grow into your heart with every breath, and God keep you from suffering such as mine !"

She stood up softly, and was about to go, but Gwen stopped her.

"Mother," she cried, "you couldn't be expected to understand children, you were meant for intellectual uses altogether ! It seems to me hard and unjust that you should now be hampered with these feelings. Why can you not go back to your old peaceful life ? You were happy in it ; now your work is interfered with, and you are not happy. I wish I could do anything for you, I wish I could satisfy you !"

"Ah, dear, you don't know how very little love would still my pain, but I don't think that even if you would, you could give it to me—I don't think you understand, dear, what love is."

"Mother," said the girl, in a low, curiously soft tone, "I do not."

Directly she had made the confession, a horrible feeling of shame came on her.

"She knows everything of me there is to know now!" she thought, with a dull ache; "I wonder what use she will make of it."

After a long wait she got some little idea. Her mother came and stood beside her silently for a minute or two, then she stooped down and kissed the girl's hand tremulously, took up her basket with its burden, and went out of the room and upstairs.

Gwen looked at the little dent made by the basket on the bed, and a new rush of loneliness flooded her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THERE was always a sort of studious hush over Waring Park encompassing the whole place as in a garment, but one day a change crept suddenly into the nature of the hush ; it lost all at once in culture and grew full of trembling awe. For Mrs. Waring lay upstairs on her great oak bed, her blue eyes looking out of her thin face full of a piteous longing.

She had only a slight attack of pleurisy, nothing to account for her quick run down, but her heart was very weak and irregular, the old doctor said, and he asked for an opinion from town.

The shock of the thing had a queer effect on Mr. Waring, even from a physical point of view.

As he sat hour by hour and watched her in a dumb vague horror, one hand always in his, *his* breath came in short gasps with strong pain, *his* eyes grew congested, *his* lips turned a dull blue and dried and cracked, the very blood slowed in his veins.

The old doctor sounded him anxiously as soon as he noticed his condition, and found his lungs as sound as a bell. It was only that the two were absolutely one flesh ; she could suffer nothing and leave him untouched. She was so sorry for him, and whenever

she could gather up her strength for the effort, she put a great strain on herself to breathe naturally; but hour by hour her power over herself grew less, and her breathing more constantly laborious.

And Gwen? Fear had found her at last, and it tore and tortured her. She knew very little of sickness, and in this sickness of her mother's there was a pale, ghastly shade of some other thing that touched the infinities.

She went in and out of her mother's room in a vague search after duty, but she never touched even her bed; she was afraid of the awful shadowy thing, and more afraid still of her mother's eyes following her hungrily. No softening grew in her eyes, no love—only fear.

And so the days wore on, and the hush fell closer round the house, and crept into the hearts of those who dwelt there.

Yet there seemed small cause for it all; the doctors saw no tangible reason for alarm; all the same they were uneasy and came frequently.

It was the eighth day of the illness, just as twilight was falling.

Mrs. Waring had had her bed moved near the window that commanded the Park, and she was looking wistfully out on to the south terrace watching Gwen walking up and down.

Gwen, in obedience to her promise to take care of herself, always chose this particular walk, bathing herself in the sunlight, and drinking in great draughts of the sweet, clear air that came across a heathy hill in the distance, and trying to gather up shreds of happy thought to feed her loneliness with, and to

soothe the vague aching that seemed to have made its home in her.

"Mary," said Mrs. Waring, suddenly,—her husband had been literally dragged out for a drive by the old doctor—"will you call Gwen? but first give me that tonic. I feel as if I would slip away in spite of myself, and I know," she murmured softly to herself, "there is something I ought to say. Are her eyes still sealed as she walks there communing with her own sad heart?" she thought, as she looked out at Gwen. "Will love never touch her—never? Will the child's life open the gate—or—must it be the death of that little child?"

She shivered down into the bedclothes, and shut her eyes.

"Ma'am, dear heart, drink this," said Mary, softly raising her, and with a great leap of her heart she saw death on the white face, "drink it, my dearie," she repeated, returning unconsciously to the old term of thirty-nine years ago, and kissing the little furrows between the brows. "You are very young, dearie," she said, softly stroking her hair; "not fit to be a grandmother!"

A soft pink flush crept into her cheeks. "Will you please call Gwen?" she murmured.

When Gwen came in her mother's eyes were closed, and her face was like marble.

The girl shivered and half turned back; a horrible inclination to fly took hold of her, but she drove back her cowardice, and came swiftly up to the bed, one of her full sleeves touched it, and she drew it away.

Her mother's eyes opened just in time to see her

little action; she shivered, and Gwen's heart began to ache in a new spot.

"It all seems so hopeless," she thought; "it is so terrible to hurt her, so pitiless, and underbred."

She stooped over her, a tress of hair escaped from her coil and fell on Mrs. Waring's cheek. Neither of them touched it for a minute.

The mother felt a sudden longing to ruffle it softly, as she had once done to a village baby's, and to feel the soft silkiness slip through her fingers, but she restrained herself and only breathed a little quicker.

"You want me, mother?" said Gwen gently, lifting up her head and fastening up her hair.

"Yes, I want you, dear."

She closed her eyes and rested. Gwen moved uneasily; the stillness oppressed her, and some change in the sick woman's face made her heart feel tight. Presently Mrs. Waring drew a long breath, and threw off some of the clothes feebly.

"They are so heavy," she said. Mary lifted her higher on the pillows. "Yes, that's better, thank you; and now, Mary, go and rest. My daughter will stay with me."

Gwen heard the resolute, masterful use of the word in absolute terror; she had a coerced, trapped feeling, and for a minute a passionate revolt shook her. What was she to do, to say? She felt as if she were caught in a mesh of bleeding, quivering nerves. She found herself drawing her breath almost imperceptibly, for fear of touching raw surfaces.

"What is it, mother?" she cried out.

There was a tone of appeal in her voice, born of

her terror. This strengthened her mother; she felt older than her child, and with the power to protect her. The ghost of a smile moved her mouth, and flickered in her eyes.

"It is death, dear," she said, with gentle gravity.

Gwen stared at her, and in an uncomprehending rigid way she repeated—"Death—death!"

"Yes," whispered the woman, "it is hard to realise—I have been so strong, but life has been losing its hold on me for some time, I think. Gwen, let me take your hand, dear—touch me as if you were used to it—as if you had tumbled over me and I had played with you ever since you can remember."

Gwen's hand shook as she gave it with white lips and wide eyes. What was that growing shadow on the small face? What was this bringing such confidence, such a curious, compelling air of possession into the timid eyes?

Mrs. Waring gave a soft, far-away little laugh that made Gwen's blood turn in the ghastly, listening silence.

"I saw the other day a young mother, a little creature, with blue eyes and yellow hair and so young—so young—put her little baby's fingers into her mouth, and bite them softly in play, and the baby laughed and kicked. *Jubelte!* Why does English sometimes fall so short? Ah, Gwen, I wish you could have seen it, nothing is like it, nothing——"

Gwen stirred in anguish; her brain was surging wildly, her whole heart and soul were prostrate in one wild prayer for help from the horrors that were closing her in. There was no idea of God in the prayer, however.

"Humphrey, Humphrey, Humphrey!" was the only thought that possessed her, and tried to break aloud in sound through her dry lips.

Then her mother's eyes closed again, and she murmured in her half sleep; when she aroused herself, after a few minutes, her gentle eyes were bright and wild. She caught Gwen's dimpled pink fingers, and put them into her mouth; and she set to bite them softly, and to kiss them, with little ripples of a girl's laughter; and her few wrinkles smoothed themselves, and the sweet rosy colour came again into the thin cheeks, and she was a careless, happy young mother playing with her first child.

Mr. Waring had come softly into the room some minutes before; he paused, and peered eagerly forward, and then there leapt into his eyes a blinding agony; he swayed, shivering, and dropped on his knees by the bed. But of this Gwen saw nothing.

As her mother kissed, and bit, and mumbled over her hand, and half sang little quaint snatches of baby song, and took her pretty fingers one by one, and told them, with low silvery laughs, "this little pig went to market and the other stayed at home!" and broke out into a louder ripple as "the little one cried queak!" her own baby "leapt in her womb," and the scales fell from her eyes, and her heart melted within her, and the breast of her dying mother was as an open book to her; she could read all the love there, and the remorse, and the infinite sorrow.

Gwen's heart stopped, and her breath refused to come—she would have died then. Her soul hovered shuddering on the threshold of life, but her baby stirred imperiously, and pulled it back; and then a torrent of

tears came to her help, and left her with soft, moist eyes, a child by her mother's side.

"Mother, oh, mother!" The infinite tenderness in her voice smote into her own heart, and made Mr. Waring rise quickly and wait, trembling with fear, and a great awe. "Mother, oh, my darling—speak—touch me—love me, your child—Gwen!"

"I will not let thee go unless thou bless me." The picture involuntarily rose before Mr. Waring's eyes as he murmured the words.

"Speak to me once, mother—I know everything, now—everything—do you hear, darling?"

But the mother still kissed and played with the trembling, clinging fingers, and sang her soft old songs, and her eyes looked up full of sunny, irresponsible happiness, and saw things of which we have not thought in our philosophy.

"Mother, oh my mother!"—but still she babbled on, smiling.

Mr. Waring came forward with bowed head, silent, in fearful reverence.

It was not for him to speak or to interfere; the ground whereon he stood was holy ground.

"Mother, mother, mother!"

The babbling had now grown drowsy and low, and Gwen had to bend close to hear it; then it ceased, and the mother lay very still. Gwen turned in terror and saw her father.

"Help, help!" she cried, "she must speak—oh, God! she must!"

Her father took her hand, and bending softly he took her mother's, and held the two in his, and one soft, shivering moan broke from him; then father and

daughter stood in the palpitating silence, and waited breathless ; but the silence grew and spread like a net around them, crushing hearts ; and the breathing of the woman grew less and less, and her face whiter, and then a strong cry rent the veil of awful silence, and Gwen fell forward as one dead on her mother's breast.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"WAS ever grief like unto my grief?" has been the cry of each wrung heart throughout all ages. The truth is, there is a dreary family likeness among them all, and a horrible absence of originality.

In this particular Gwen Strange could score over the whole sad brood; her grief was aloof, alone; it differed in every point from the kindly race of men, it had no balm and less outlet, she could not cry nor strive, she could not throw her whole soul against fate and fall back with the pain dulled from sheer tiredness.

Every day, with the little white mother lying cold on her bed, she still walked in the sun on the south terrace, and cherished her child, but virtue had gone out of her.

"She will kill me," Mrs. Fellowes told her husband, "if she looks like that long! She's not tragic, not an atom, or dramatic; I think she must look as Dante did when he stood before the gates of Saint Ilario."

"Yes, one hardly dares think of the girl, walking, and eating, and sleeping; and she looks younger than ever I saw her. What is *he* doing now? I must go up soon."

"Sitting holding her hand, except when he is told to come to his meals. Of course, knowing the man, one could describe his grief to a T. It's just himself."

"What will time do for the two, I wonder?"

"There is something gone from Gwen that no time will give back to her; I wish, oh, I wish I knew how it was at the end. Did that woman go down into the grave still seeking her lost motherhood? Oh, John, John, God in Heaven help women! I wonder if He knew quite everything when He made us, He is all masculine. I don't think He altogether did, or He would have stayed His hand and have had mercy."

"My little Ruth, my poor little wife, life even for us is hard!"

"But it is simpler; it is the complications which put barbs on our arrows, the vague yearnings quivering in us ignorantly, not with the knowledgeable, healthy hammer-strokes of men's anguish; and our bodies are nearer our souls. Think of Gwen, with her unborn child, under that heartful of unnameable pain! John, it's only three o'clock—will you drive me into the town? the market is full on—I must see some women who are too stolid for nerves—oh—the letters, and one from Humphrey! John, he's down with fever, and Brydon's only half way through!"

"Not a man-Jack of the blacks—being mostly Christianised—is worth his salt; but for Tolly we'd cave in altogether; the fellow's a brick, and seems like developing the beginnings of an intellect, just in the nick of time too; never in all my life was I so knocked into a cocked hat as by this fever."

"Look at the writing, John, it's shocking."

"As for Brydon, he had a narrow squeak; he's out

of the bush now, but as weak as a rat. On the whole, the sand flies are worse than the fever. Don't dwell on this touch of fever to Gwen, it's really of no consequence, but it's an awful nuisance on account of the delay. From here we go on to a place about a hundred miles off, to where we have traced Broad. Hitherto the blacks have been friendly, but beyond the hills I hear we are to look out for squalls. Don't expect many letters after this, as the modes of conveyance are very casual and untrustworthy; neither can I count upon receiving our letters safely. I will hurry there and back with all possible speed. I know you will always see Gwen at least once a day.'

"See, John, I can hardly read it, what is it? Oh, 'love for you,' and something for the Rector I can hardly read."

"We will go in on our way to the market; the ponies are at the door."

Gwen was in her boudoir when Mrs. Fellowes went to her. She was sitting with a bundle of papers in her hand. She thrust them into a drawer, and ran and, as it were, got into the other woman's arms, and lay there with a short audible movement of pain.

"Tell me just how you think my husband is," she said. Mrs. Fellowes started. "Ah, you're afraid too!" cried Gwen.

"Gwen, I know really very little; those attacks are always very sharp, hardly ever dangerous except with bad constitutions, John says—he has been reading up a medical book about African fevers."

"'Bad constitutions and complications,' the book says—I have it; and he has a complication in some sort of sunstroke."

"Gwen!"

"Yes," she went on in a quiet level voice. "He missed the last mail by some idiocy of the blacks, and he walked ten miles all through a swamp to catch it, with the fever still on him; when he got home he was half delirious. He lay and, it seems, turned his heart inside out, both audibly and on paper; see, I have it all here in these sheets!" she said, with bitter irony, catching her breath, as she took them out of the drawer.

"Gwen, my Gwen, what do you mean?"

"I mean he lay there and told out into words—blatant, awful English words—on to these sheets, how he loves me, me! but in words no other man ever before used, or dared to use, or the soul of every loved woman would have been annihilated long ago, they are not fitted to bear such magnificent burdens!—He told, too, in precisely the same uncompromising way, what he wants of me, and what he considers I am capable of in this line. Mrs. Fellowes, I know just exactly what it cost him to go away! Nothing is hid. Then yesterday——"

She stood up rather wildly,—

"Do you know that yesterday I learned in one choking gulp the grinding truth of my mother's poor tragedy of life? I learned too," she said slowly, throwing out her arms softly, with a pathetic gesture of appeal, "all in one blinding second my own infinite love for her; but there was no time to tell, she died first. I am crushed with knowledge; I am spared nothing, and then—ah, sickness is degrading! Delilah's shears are nothing to it! To think that here in my hands I hold the whole unsuppressed heart of a man!"

"But, Gwen, I cannot grasp it—how came you by all this knowledge? Humphrey was too ill to write all that big bundle of sheets."

"He wrote, as he spoke, in delirium; part of it is absolutely maniacal; but, my God! there is truth enough in it! I see Humphrey's poor, sick, naked soul in every line!"

She hid her face and moaned softly.

"But, love, I don't understand. How came you by those sheets?"

"Brydon sent the letters. Poor boy, he wrote a little humble scrawl himself, that has a touch of pathos in it."

"I think Brydon was the more delirious of the two! What business has he meddling in matters too big for him!"

"Oh, he's young and very romantic; and—have you ever heard of that picture he painted of me?"

"That sketch for your mother?" she said softly.

Gwen winced.

"No, oh no; one he came down and made of me the day I was married. It is not me at all, it is a beautiful, sexful, mother-woman; it was to that woman Humphrey wrote those things! I am the rival of my own picture."

Mrs. Fellowes jumped up and knelt, weeping bitterly, at Gwen's knees.

"Gwen, send for Humphrey; you are his first duty; he will come in spite of that miserable missionary, who never had any business venturing his nose where no one wanted it—he will come to you at once!"

For a second Gwen stared frozenly at her, then she drew herself a little away.

“But why, why should I?” she asked. “Can you not see, my God! can you not see that I am not ready for him?”

The cold grey of her face turned to a vivid red, and she got up hastily and went to the window.

CHAPTER XL.

GWEN's duty-forced efforts to comfort her father were incessant and rather tragic; he said very little, and worked his usual number of hours conscientiously at his latest work, but the best part of him was away. His head bowed a little more every day, his step fell a little more heavily, his eye lost a fresh spark of life; he was following his wife in his patient, well-bred manner, with neither cry nor moan.

Sudden fits of half compunctious duty would now and again seize upon him, and remind him that he had a daughter who also knew sorrow; then he would pursue Gwen softly, and catch her, no matter how inconvenient it might be, and ply her with questions on embarrassing topics. Gwen was very gentle with him, and used to do him small services, with a curious shy anxiety that had a touch of motherliness in it.

One day, late in August, Mrs. Fellowes was sitting down for a brief rest, when to her astonishment Gwen was announced: she had never sought her of her own accord since her mother's death.

She sat down now quite naturally, and looked round the room with a pleased smile.

"Ah! you have altered that bracket, it used to be

in the other corner ! And the piano, I hardly know if I like it there—I believe I do. I wonder why my tea is never an atom like yours ; is it the cream, or the cups, or what ? ”

When she had drunk her tea she put the cup down, and said suddenly, “ I would like to go to Strange Hall next week : will you come with me ? ”

“ Next week ! ” repeated Mrs. Fellowes.

“ Yes. I know this sudden move looks rather insane, but I have been thinking it over for some time. The child is Humphrey’s ; it has a right to be born in the home of its father, and—and—I cannot go without you ! ”

“ I shouldn’t dream of letting you, my Gwen, only you took me by surprise. Mary will go too, of course, but what about your father ? ”

Gwen looked disturbed.

“ I don’t know. Do you think my going or staying will make much difference to him ? ”

“ I do, dear, a very great difference ; but he will think as I do, now you have spoken, that you are doing right. When we are away John will be with him every moment he can spare.”

“ As if I didn’t know that ! ” Gwen said. “ I will tell him to-night.”

To the amazement of them all, Mr. Waring, as soon as he had grasped the situation, rose to it in a quite remarkable way ; the proceeding on Gwen’s part struck him as most fit and proper, and he braced himself up to support her. He also announced his intention of accompanying the *cortège*.

In the first shock of his resolve Gwen winced ; the fact of carrying him in her train, and on such an errand,

brought a spice of ludicrousness into the affair that seemed to her ghastly.

The day before they started she surprised him in the study, grasping in one hand a heap of manuscript in her mother's pretty hand-writing, and reading, with knit brows, a copy of Chavasse's "Advice to a Mother."

This was too much for Gwen; she escaped to her room, and cried and laughed, and cried and laughed again in a perfect paroxysm of grief and piteous amusement.

It was in the end quite a toss-up as to Gwen's ever seeing her baby at all, she hovered so long on the borders of death. Her silent, lonely, enduring anguish had shattered her more than any of them had guessed, and then, as ill-luck would have it, the first sound that struck on her ear when consciousness was coming back was the shrill shriek of her lusty boy.

She shuddered down again into the regions of darkness, and it was only after two distracting hours that they got her back among them.

Day after day she held the child and pondered over it; she was very gentle, and ate and drank in an absent way all that was given her, but she hardly spoke at all, some leaven was working in her.

"Then this haunting, sweet-bitter pain is motherhood," she thought, the first day she was up, as she watched the sleeping child gobbling a red fist, "and it's for this that one half the women in the world live and brood Madonna-like over their infants, with that awful peace in their eyes which takes the commonness from the most common of them! Goodness, what wouldn't I give for just the merest knowledge of that

motherhood that rests and broods and commands the world! That painted wretch downstairs is teeming with it, and—it's bitter, it's terrible, to want your mother as I want mine now, to teach me the meaning of motherhood!"

She stood up, and leaned forward over the baby.

"If this feeling grows much more in me I shall go mad," she murmured; "I am not quite sane now. Baby, my own little baby, can't you help me to be in absolute touch with the beautiful, mysterious things that are the crown of womanhood? Seemingly not," she said, turning away, "with all your warm sweetness. I believe I have a fair understanding of this part of a mother, I could make a fool of myself over the tiny thing there, I could—Oh!—Mother, mother! can I never forget you over my hands! Must a new heartache spring up every hour? Is there rest nowhere?—Ah, Humphrey, if only I weren't myself and you weren't just you, I'd set off this minute and find you!—Certainly I am mad, and here are Mrs. Fellowes and Mary upon me!"

CHAPTER XLI.

ABOUT a month after her child's birth, an urgent message came from Strange's steward to Lady Strange. He was very ill and must see her.

She drove to his house, and found him dying, and infinitely concerned that he could not deliver up his stewardship into his master's hands. He was a man who had always rather suffered from a hypertrophied conscience, and perhaps he exaggerated the importance of his office, and the impossibility of getting any one to follow him in it; at any rate, he impressed Gwen a good deal, and rather put her on her mettle.

After reviewing the situation, she came to the conclusion that if no one else could keep things straight she would undertake to do it herself. As she took off her things a new complication struck her; to do this she must be on the spot, and how would that suit her father?

She was rather absent and full of the question when she got down to tea, and Mrs. Fellowes, as a sort of cure and antidote to her wistful aloofness, went and brought the baby. And then Mr. Waring came in, and contemplated it silently, as he had done every day since it was born.

Gwen told them of Hopkins, and in a rather shy, tentative way spoke of her project.

To her astonishment Mr. Waring woke up fully, and spoke with hearty approval of it ; then, without giving her a chance to reply, he went out, but soon returned with a large parcel of manuscript, tied up laboriously with string, the knots all over it in haphazard style.

"This is the book," he said slowly, and with frequent pauses, "on which we have worked so long ; it is at last complete. It is sad, is it not, that it is only I who am here to see the end ? I have been more than once afraid that I should be unable to finish it, it is hard to work alone, old habits are strong within us—I will attempt no new work."

He swayed a little, and leaned heavily on the table. "You, my daughter, have your work here ; you must uphold the house of your husband, and of his first-born ; to-morrow I will go home."

Gwen attempted to say something, but he motioned her to silence.

"You may perhaps think your duty is with me, it is not ; it is here, and here you must remain to guard your husband's lands and to cherish his child. It is the soul that is just entering life that needs all your care, not that which is done with it."

Then he went and stood over the child, and suddenly some vague old feeling surged up in him, and he raised his hands that trembled above its head, and his lips were moved by a mute blessing.

Mrs. Fellowes intended going herself early that week, as she was a good deal wanted at home ; but she could not bring herself to leave Gwen entirely alone. Then she had heard not a word of Humphrey

from his wife's lips for more than a month now, and his letters to her, after one she got assuring her of his perfect recovery, were anything but satisfactory. They were short and dry, and told her nothing. Besides, as the missionary he was in pursuit of had escaped through the intervention of a tribe of friendly blacks some other way, and was already on his way home, probably preparing his experiences for the religious press, Humphrey's continued presence in Africa was simply ridiculous, and she was in a fever of anxiety as to the next step of this most trying couple.

A few nights after she was very glad she had decided to remain.

She had just fallen off into her first sleep when she was awakened by a violent shake, and found Gwen standing above her, white and rigid, and too terrified to speak. She pulled her out of the room and into the nursery by her nightdress sleeve, to show her her baby in very bad convulsions in the nurse's arms.

The whole night through the two women watched the strange, cruel possession that twisted and contorted the small flower-like face and the tender limbs, and next day the spasms ceased, and a sharp attack of bronchitis set in.

Gwen's mute, tense agony upset even the old doctor, who, as a rule, was emotion-proof enough; he would have given a great deal to have been able to reassure her, but he could not in conscience do so, the child was about as dangerously ill as it was possible for it to be.

But he came of a lusty stock, and fought gallantly for his life, while his mother hovered breathless above

him, and allowed no one but herself to touch him for any service ; and when she absolutely could keep her eyes open no longer, she would trust him to no one but Mrs. Fellowes.

As she fought desperately for her child's life, the girl, for the first time in her own, lost herself in supreme self-forgetfulness, and then at last the latent truth in her nature broke through its bonds, and unfolded itself hour by hour, and overpowered though she was by grief and terror on the child's account, Mrs. Fellowes blessed God and rejoiced.

The splendid reserves of the girl's tenderness, her lovely, frank abandonment to her new-found motherhood, fairly staggered the elder woman. She could hardly keep control over herself, she felt so small, so humble, so absolutely unfit to do as she ought to do. There was to her something most holy, most reverent in the awakening of this virgin mother ; she felt almost indecent in her greedy absorption of its regal loveliness, and this time God did stay His hand, and His heart inclined itself to mercy.

Seven days after the beginning of the illness, a little ray of hope began to play in the doctor's eyes, and sent a wave of new, sweet life rushing through Gwen's veins.

The next day, and the next, this grew and strengthened, and at the end of the day after that the doctor spoke with perfect confidence, and he added,—

"I never until now knew exactly how much a mother's love can do, Lady Strange. You are an incomparable nurse."

When he went away Gwen still knelt by the cot, with moist eyes, and looked at the baby, who suddenly

stirred, and awoke, and began to watch her in that terrible all-knowing way babies have, then a little wavering ghost of a smile touched its mouth. Gwen waited with parted lips, and the smile grew and took proper, tangible human shape, till the tender mouth gave a little tremble with it, and the eyes widened, and suddenly, to Mrs. Fellowes' horror, Gwen fell back against her in a dead swoon.

When she had recovered and they had brought her to her room, she fell asleep at once, and it was midnight when she awoke.

She got up directly, and stole softly out to see her baby, who was sleeping peacefully with Mrs. Fellowes on guard.

"He couldn't possibly be better," she whispered; "you must go back to bed at once."

"And you—you must too, you look green with tiredness."

She knelt down by the cot with a little soft cooing sound that half frightened herself; she turned her head to find out where it came from; when she knew she smiled up at Mrs. Fellowes, and her eyes were radiant with a sweet mystery.

When she came in to see her baby next morning she carried a telegram she had just written in her hand. It was to Strange, and very simple.

"Will you come?" it said, "we want you, baby and I."

"Read it," she said to Mrs. Fellowes; "and will you send it yourself?"

She stooped over the cot for a long time, and nothing was to be seen of her but the tips of two pink ears.

CHAPTER XLII.

"How soon can he come?" said Gwen, when Mrs. Fellowes returned after sending the message. "I have been counting up, it must be three weeks even if he is at the coast; if he is inland it may be longer. Now the missionary is safe, he must be just hunting; he will be sure to get my message without much delay."

She spoke rapidly, and walked about the room with her boy in her arms.

"She hasn't a doubt as to his reply to her message," thought Mrs. Fellowes; "how absolutely she trusts him!"

"Will he wonder when he sees I am here—will he guess why I came?" she went on in her glad excitement. "Darling, sweet, beauty! What will he think of you?"

"Gwen, sit down, or let me take him, you are not perfectly strong yet."

"I am," she cried, with a happy laugh, "I am a giant refreshed with wine, a whole volume of new life has flowed into me, I could move the world at this moment, not to say carry this mite. I am a woman at last, a full, complete, proper woman, and it is magnificent. No other living woman can feel as I do; other women absorb these feelings as they do their

daily bread and butter, and they have to them the same placid, everyday taste, they slip into their womanhood ; mine has rushed into me with a great torrent—I love my husband, I worship him, I adore him—do you hear, my dear ? ”

She stopped in her march, and turned on Mrs. Fellowes a radiant, triumphant face.

“ Ah, if I hadn’t you to tell all this to, I would go out into the fields and shout it aloud. And what are *you* crying for ? I am not mad. I am, I suppose, what Humphrey would call natural, but somehow it makes me feel too big for the room. Hold the child while I open the windows.”

Mrs. Fellowes, as soon as she got hold of him, carried him off to the nursery, and simply insisted on Gwen’s lying down and holding her tongue.

“ Do you want to bring a fever on yourself,” she demanded sternly, “ and be a scarecrow when Humphrey comes ? You are shockingly young, my Gwen ! ”

She was sane after that, and tried to behave as if nothing had happened to her, but the change in her was quite visible to the naked eye. Next day she buckled to her steward’s work with a whole-hearted dominance that ensured success, and Mrs. Fellowes went home to her husband big with happy news.

* * * * *

When five weeks had passed, and she had neither message nor sight of Humphrey, Gwen’s magnificent abandonment of joy had a break, and a trembling came into it, and into her eyes a wave of fear, and every time she came in from her work in the village, or on the home farm, she betook herself to the baby to steady her nerves.

And then the press began to set flying little gnat-like biting doubts as to Strange's unaccountable silence, after it was ascertained, through a long-delayed scrap of a note to Mrs. Fellowes, that he had joined an ivory expedition into an unsettled district. To add to her anxieties, the missionary, grateful for his intended capture, ran down to Strange Hall, and being rather an ass, and having been left with only the tail end of a constitution—a solemn and gloomy one—he gave her a most lurid and awful impression of those parts into which Humphrey had penetrated.

She put a brave front on, but she had a shocking time of it, and her usual song to her baby in exactly Humphrey's tones was,—

“Dann willst du weine, du liebe kleine!”

which the baby looked upon as a huge joke.

Week after week passed and not a word, and then whisperings of relief expeditions began to stir the papers, and Mrs. Fellowes was hurrying up wildly with her work to be able to get to Gwen.

At last she came over from the station in a fly, a day or two before she was expected, and found Gwen in Strange's den, which showed tokens of her all over the place, playing with her child, now a big fellow, who beat the record in the matter of crawling.

When the nurse took him at last, Gwen said to Mrs. Fellowes rather grimly,—

“The county considers I should wear a widow's cap, and sport crêpe, and my horrible state of plumpness makes me ‘to stink in their nostrils.’ Just look at my arms! I wish I could oblige them,” she went on

wearily, "and bear my woe according to their rules of decency. Lady Mary rolled down on me, and stayed a week, and never got out what she came to say until I was putting her into the railway carriage on her way back to London; then she produced her rebuke on the top of a sigh, and began a prayer, but the train started before she got well into it.

" 'My dear,' she said, 'I think that under the circumstances a plain black gown and a bonnet—hats to my mind are at present unseemly—and then, my dear Gwen, if by any means you could manage, ahem, not to *add* to your plumpness—people in our position must set an example—I assure you, for myself, I lost eight pounds and a half the first six months of my widowhood.'

"Then she began her rather irrelevant prayer."

"Gwen, sit down, and I'll make tea, and tell you about your father."

Gwen leaned back in her chair, and put her hands to her hot head.

"I forget everything but myself and this fattening misery of mine. He is failing very much, is he not? His letters somehow have a fragile sound. They have a horrible habit of making me howl, I have got so maudlin I howl now quite easily; he has been at 'Chavasse' again, and to rather an awful extent."

"Yes, he is failing day by day, and unfolding himself at the same time. I never quite realised before how beautiful and single-hearted his character is; he comes now to see me, or rather to sit and meditate in my presence, after he has been to your mother's grave, and when he has sat and rested he speaks of you. You can gather the way, I fancy, from his letters—

oh, the quaintness, the pathetic grotesqueness of his remarks!"

"I have often wanted to ask you if Mr. Fellowes ever brings his professional capacity to bear on my father?" asked Gwen.

"Never. 'Only God is fit to undertake the care of such a soul as his,' John says, 'neither he nor his soul is subject to ordinary laws, each lives out the life given it to live.' Good gracious! fancy John or any other parson attempting to shove theology into such a nature, or to dig down after his beliefs! Gwen, darling, you may be in good condition, but how very tired you look!"

"Tired! Oh yes, I am, I cannot tell you how tired! At first I used to live in a whirl, so as to tire myself, now there's no need for it, I am just as tired when I get up as when I go to bed, and nothing will drive the days on, and the endlessness of life sickens one. I feel crêpey enough to please any one, goodness knows; but even if Humphrey never comes, I will neither wear crêpe nor put on any of the trappings of decent widowhood, for I know he never got my message. If he is dead, he died knowing nothing, I am no honest widow of his, and I will wear hats to the end of the chapter, and possibly grow fat, and outrival Lady Mary, who knows!"

"You see, my life is a healthy one; I ride miles a day all over the farms; there isn't a fact concerning manure I couldn't tell you; as to drainage, I feel like turning into a pipe myself; I have even a medicine chest, and doctor the babies, Heaven help them! If I could only follow him as he would me, it would be less awful; but, you see, there's baby; my place is

here, and I must just stand and wait like those wretched creatures in the hymn. As for those relief expeditions, though I send cheques, I look upon them as a farce; as if he wanted to be caught and brought home like a missionary!"

"It seems to me you are on the go from morning to night: what time do you leave yourself for sleeping?"

"Oh, any amount; more than I want."

"How long did you sleep last night?"

"Oh, I forget. Are you too tired to drive to a farm about a mile away?"

"Tired! No, dear," stooping down and kissing her, "but must you go? Lie down, and let me read to you."

Anything in the shape of tenderness was just the one stroke too many for Gwen; she gave a quick, dry sob, and moved away.

"I can't stand that sort of thing," she said; "I told you I had got maudlin. Treat me as you would a nice, orthodox Christian widow, who wears crêpe and caps, and gets just to the proper state of thinness, pulling herself up, however, just short of scragginess like a self-respecting creature. And now we must hurry, for I hear the carriage."

She turned round as she was leaving the room, and laughed.

"I am altogether losing tone. Do you know that young Will Dyer—Sir William's black sheep, whom I have been occupying my spare moments in being a mother to, and in trying to detach from the devil—began yesterday to make violent love to me?"

"I don't wonder!"

"Good gracious me, why?"

"Look at your face! You are a woman now, my good Gwen."

"And is this the first result? God help us! Is my one pride in life to become a thorn in my flesh?"

"That's as you take it! It will, unless you are careful, be a very considerable thorn in other people's. Good gracious, child! why even virtue in women is very much a matter of temperament, and where the temperament is, there will the opportunities be gathered together."

CHAPTER XLIII.

LATE one afternoon, two men, looking unspeakably battered, got into a fly at a small off station, and told the man to drive them to Strange Hall.

"I'll not show to a soul for a week," said the first man, who, if one looked at him microscopically, seemed like the remains of Strange, "never in all my life have I felt so humiliated. To be held by the leg by a parcel of niggers for the best part of four months, and at my age, is too much for any fellow."

"You were next to off your head most of the time, and then only for us you'd have escaped long ago," said Brydon.

"Don't try to find excuses, it's too damnable altogether; and to think, after all, that those idiots got home months sooner, laden with ivory!"

"After the week what will you do?" asked the other, looking out of the window. "You'll show yourself to your people directly you are presentable, I suppose?"

"Give interviews to reporters probably," he returned shortly.

Brydon furtively watched the gaunt, shattered man, old before his time, who not so very long before had looked as if he could move the world.

"Oh, that woman!" he thought savagely.

Almost in spite of himself he had become the keeper of all the elder man's secrets, and the office weighed frightfully on him.

By some extraordinary mischance, neither the letters sent at that time nor the cablegram ever reached Strange; they came some time after the expedition had gone, and in transmission were lost, and the negligent messengers thought best to entirely deny the existence of any.

When Strange enquired at the office at Cairo there was no account of any cable for him, the clerk who had received it had been exchanged, and Strange made no very pressing enquiry, for he hardly expected one, and as a P. and O. boat was starting the next hour he took passage on her and went on board—even giving the reporters the slip.

As a matter of fact, he was so desperately ill at the time that he was hardly responsible for his actions, or he must have recovered the record of the cable, and both Brydon and Tolly were too much occupied in the attempt to get him home alive to think of anything else. They succeeded, as it turned out, but only by the skin of his teeth.

On the whole, despite certain eccentricities, both Tolly and Brydon had done better than any other men possibly could have done; their sentimental devotion to Strange put starch into their rather limp souls, and their uncomplaining heroism under the most shocking sufferings was almost pathetic; and then, by some special providence, they had both escaped the second fever that nearly put an end to Strange.

"What's that, do you see, in the field there? My

eyes are dim yet," said Strange, peering out at some object a few fields off.

"I don't know, it looks like a hump."

"Driver, just turn into that lane and take the south road.—It's a silo! By Jove! old Hopkins is coming on; and look, all that waste moor under cultivation! I always said it would grow potatoes. Seemingly the place is not neglected. Hopkins was always a good fellow, but I had no idea until now he wasn't also an ass. I dreamed frequently of that ensilage scheme, some one else has hatched out my dream for me. Oh Lord, here's this shivering on me again! Where's the draught?"

"In your breast-pocket."

"Tell him to wait, I can't get in like this, 'there's a decency to be observed!'"

The driver waited, revolving in his mind suppositions as to his remarkable fare, and wondering why, "in the devil's name," the trap shook as if it had the palsy.

After quite half an hour it stopped, and he had orders to go on, while Strange mopped the cold sweat from his face with a trembling hand.

"This degrades a fellow!" he muttered. As a rule, he pulled himself well together after these attacks, but this time he got no reaction.

When they reached the door he was almost unconscious.

"Take me quietly to my den," he muttered, "don't let the servants bother me." Then he fainted dead off.

CHAPTER XLIV.

As he lay in the death-like sleep of exhaustion that followed his swoon, the change in Strange was terribly evident. He had shrunk to half his former size, his clothes hung in bags on his limp, thin limbs, his eyes were sunk into deep hollows, his skin was yellow and puckered, and his lips were drawn back from his teeth in a way that told of fever and thirst.

When Brydon, with the help of the panic-stricken servants, had got him to the sofa,—knowing his horror of fuss,—he told them to send at once for the doctor, and then dismissed them with the utmost speed; and now he stood at the window, revolving many things, and wondering, if Strange grew worse, what would happen—would he send for his wife, and would she come?

“My God! I wish I did not know quite so much of him,” he muttered; “I wish he had not, in his ravings, turned himself inside out in that ghastly way. No man should know so much of another fellow as I do of him, it is like eavesdropping.”

Strange moaned, and Brydon crept over and covered his feet with awkward tenderness; then he moved softly through the room, looking at the skins, and

Oriental stuffs, the colours of which slid into him, and comforted his soul to some slight extent.

He was vaguely fingering a piece of drapery, when he struck his foot against the leg of a chair ; he looked round breathlessly to see if he had disturbed Strange. No—he still slept, and Brydon continued his purposeless inspection, and, drawn by some strange coloured texture, he went towards it, and came face to face with his own bride-picture.

He staggered back two or three steps in a spasm of terror. He had learnt a deal too much of that picture in Strange's ravings, but the overmastering love for one's own creation—inherent in God and man—forced him back to it ; and, as he looked, all the past died out, right back to that day when he was sitting in Waring Church, painting, and wiping great sweat-drops from his face in the ecstasy of knowing that he had done a great work, and one that would live for ever.

A sudden indefinable sound from the terrace brought him to himself.

It was a queer, primitive sound ; he felt somehow that Strange should not hear it, and went to the window to find out what it was.

Presently it began again, and ended in a chuckle ; then he caught sight of a flutter of petticoats around the corner, and could distinguish a murmur of words. Then a distinct squeak startled him, and suddenly a toddling creature appeared on the terrace, and, making a grab at a flower, fell sprawling on its face, and in a fraction of time was pounced upon by the owner of the white skirts, who cuddled it to her breast, with anxious care ; but as it only kicked and crowed she lifted her head from her kissing. And there, within ten paces of

him, was his picture made flesh, but with the sorrow of all ages upon her face.

He swayed, put his hand to his head, then he dropped, like a man in a dream, into a chair, and murmured,—

“Oh, God! has the earth opened—has she fallen from Heaven—has—has——”

He looked again, and the flutter of her white dress in the sunlight gave to his dazed, enchanted eyes the figure of a new Madonna, before whom the whole world must kneel and rise up to call her blessed.

She came on, still murmuring to her baby; she came up to the French window, and put out her hand to open it—then the madness fell from Brydon, and the whole truth came with a rush.

He sprang to his feet, cast one perturbed look at Strange, “Kill him or not, I can’t face it,” he muttered, and fled.

When Gwen got into the room, she sank wearily into a chair, and throwing off her hat let the baby butt her at his will.

When the smile for her baby flickered off her face, the final, contained anguish in it was awful; but the child gave her little time to nurse grief. Every moment she had either to rock him, croon little songs to him, or tickle him; if she were silent or passive for a moment a lusty butt against her breast or a punch from the pink dimpled fist brought her back to his service.

As she sat—sideways to the window—it was impossible for her to see Strange, but there was nothing to hide her from him.

The soft murmur of croons and baby-sounds at last half awoke him; he lay for some moments and let the vague music creep into his semi-consciousness, then he opened his eyes impatiently and closed them again; it was only one more dream, he thought—he was beset with dreams, tortured, shaken by them.

“Oh, God! those drugs,” he muttered.

Again the murmurs broke on his ears; there was a chuckle, a tender, protesting voice, and a sharp little squeal. He shivered, and peered out towards the sounds; his eyes were dimmed from his great sickness, and could only see “men as trees walking.” Gradually he made out the shapes of a woman and a little child.

“Is it a dream, or death?” he murmured. “Oh! God, spare me! I am haunted by delusions.”

Another little murmur, and a soft sob; it was the woman this time. Again he opened his eyes, and through his dreaming saw the little yellow-headed child laughing round the chair, and inviting the woman to a game of bo-peep.

“Oh! my baby, my own, own baby,” she broke out, stooping to him, “do you know what they say—what they din into my ears, little love, dear baby mine? They say your father is dead, *dead*, DEAD, dear one. And must you live, grow up, little manikin, without knowing what a man he was? Sweet, must I sing?—Ah! If you only knew how it hurts!”

The smile flickered back to her face, as she took him on her knee, and she sang a little song he evidently knew well, for he kicked and crowed by way of chorus; then he played with his bare toes for a little—his

mother, as she sang, had pulled off his socks to kiss his feet—and as he played she returned to her sad soliloquy.

"You will have to take all from me on trust, little one, and, of course, you will think I exaggerate, my own, when I tell you that your mother had the best man that God yet made, or will make, to love her, to love her. Ah! what love it was!" she repeated gently.

Then her eyes dreamed, and rested for a moment; all the pain fled, and her face shone with radiant triumph, and her mouth trembled like a happy child's.

"Ah! what love!" she said again; but instantly all this was swamped in a big wave of pain; she caught her child and kissed him rather wildly, whispering, "Baby, she killed this man who loved her—killed him, baby, because she was unnatural and couldn't love—she killed her mother, too; and oh! baby, when in her loneliness she pleads and prays that God may let her love Him, He hides His face from her; and it is all quite just, baby mine—her mere desert.

"Ah! my own—I can't sing, I am so tired."

She put him down gently, and looked before her with sad, unseeing eyes.

Strange struggled to break the spell—to speak—to move; but he was impotent—paralysed. A vague horror—full of sickness and delirium—had him by the throat. He put his hand feebly to his forehead to brush the sweat away.

"This is more cruel than death," he muttered.

Meanwhile, the baby—being a young person of an exploring tendency, and loose on the premises—played

havoc with his opportunities. Having smashed two Venetian glasses, and an atom of old Sèvres, he perceived his father on the sofa, and toddled over to investigate him—but so softly that no notice was taken, till Strange suddenly found a tiny fist thrust into his mouth; then he started amazedly, and touched the child with quaking awe.

Just then Gwen discovered her loss, ran a few steps forward with outstretched hands, and saw the two—Humphrey and his child.

“Humphrey—Humphrey!” she cried faintly, tottering towards them; then she fell at their feet.

To Strange it was still a cruel dream—her falling but part of it. Between the two, the child stood wondering, then he caught sight of a diamond on his father's finger. He seized on the finger and dragged it to show his mother; but as she took no notice he smacked her face soundly with his other hand—and simultaneously the two awoke, he from his delirium, she from her swoon.

And for one moment the two peered at each other through the fog of a bitter past. Then she sat up slowly, and looked at his face marvelling above her, and at his hand caught in her baby's, and broke into half incoherent, wild explainings. But suddenly the consciousness that words could in no sort of way touch her case silenced her; she just sat dumbly on the floor, knowing that she had done evil in ignorance, but that she had come up through great tribulation into unutterable joy, full of knowledge, and with a soul as white as Naaman's skin. And so—as best became her—she simply held up her face to be kissed, while the baby clutched hold of one of her fingers and one of his

father's, and in words all his own and untranslatable, but mightier than those of gods or churches, decreed that henceforth and for ever those two should be one flesh. Which, after all, is the especial mission of his kind.

THE END.

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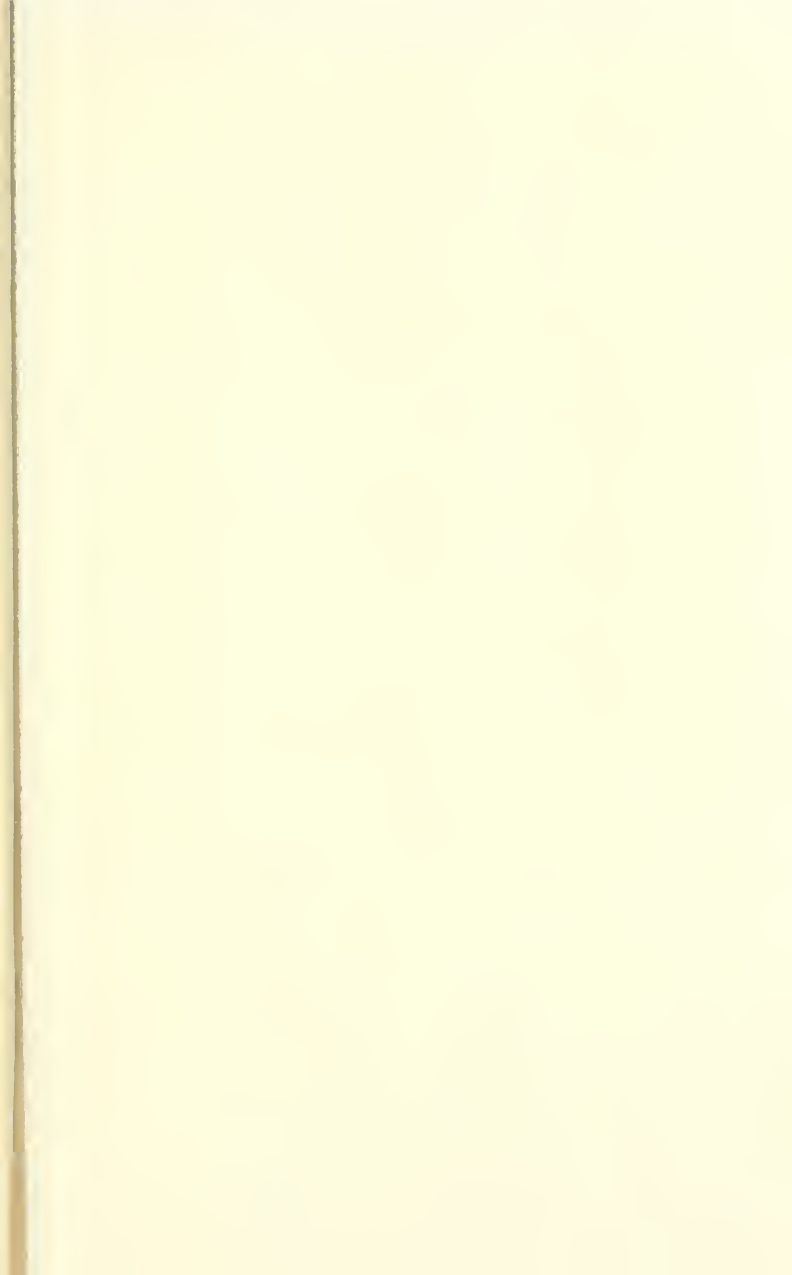
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